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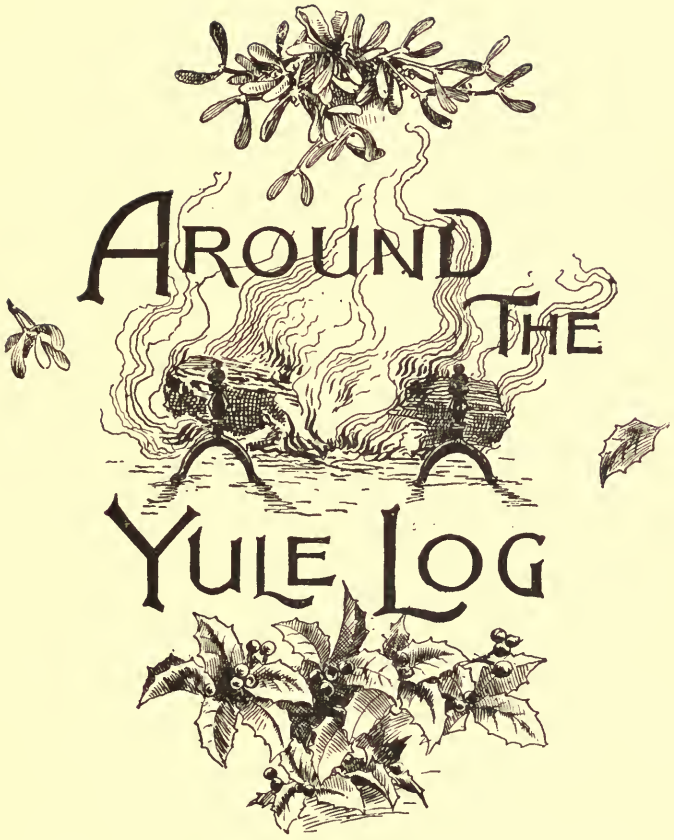
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AROUND THE
YULE LOG



"TWAS CHRISTMAS TOLD THE MERRIEST "TALE"

AROUND THE YULE LOG

BY

WILLIS BOYD ALLEN

Author of "The Boyhood of John Kent," "Snowed In," "Christmas at Surf Point," "The Pine Cone Series," "Navy Blue," etc.

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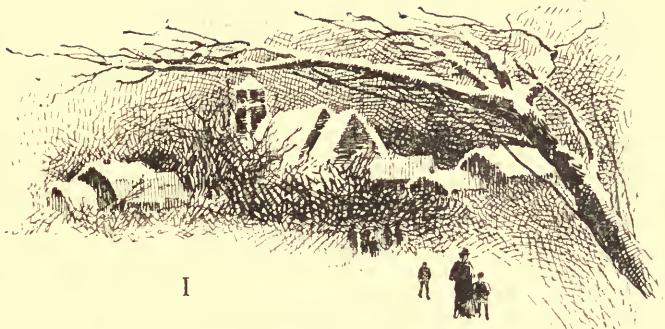
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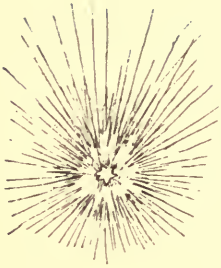


I

AROUND THE YULE LOG

It is the waning of the year. As the twilight, often hastened by the soft blur of falling snow, encroaches more and more upon the brief day, we gather closely about our firesides, and there, heart to heart, are wont to listen as at no other period of this prosaic nineteenth century life, to tales of olden time. More than ever are we drawn together at the season of our Saviour's birth, when the yule log glows amain and the sweet spirit of Christmas kindles within us a warmth and gladness that responds to the cheerful blaze upon the hearth.

Christmas day! Does it not grow dearer to us every year? The summers come and go; we rush to and fro on our little errands of business and pleasure; great joys dawn in our lives, dark shadows of bitter disappointment creep over them; we are glad, sorrowful, eager, weary, well, ill; Life's heart beats strongly, and Death is busy in its midst; we strive for the Beautiful, the True, and the Good; we hide our faces in helpless agony of shame and remorse;



yet again comes the dear Day of days, with its blessed associations, memories, hopes.

CHRISTMAS! Do you remember what that word meant to you when you were a child? What a mysterious halo of light surrounded the day! How the very sound of its name suggested the fragrance of the fir-tree and wax-candles and marvelous toys, and the far-off tinkle of sleigh bells, or beat of tiny reindeer hoofs upon the snowy roof! Has the approach of Christmas but an indifferent charm in this grown-up work-a-day world of ours? If so, let us strive and pray for those delicate sensibilities of childhood that caught and reveled in the fragrant atmosphere of the day; that could hear, knowing naught beyond the bliss it brought, the voice of the Founder of Christmas blessing little children as it blessed them in distant Palestine eighteen centuries ago. Let us forgive our debtors this day as we would be forgiven; let no child's cry fall unheeded on our ears; let our hearts be open to the tenderest, purest, most sacred thoughts, and to every ennobling influence; let us be alert and watchful, on this bright morning-day of the year; let the sun shine into and through us, shedding its warmth and brightness upon all about us; let us be once more as little children, and put out our hands trustingly, to be led.



Hope—Joy—Bethlehem—Christmas—Christ! How softly the words chime together, like Christmas bells! With their sweet music comforting and gladdening our hearts, may we gather by the fireside to-night, to listen to these simple tales

AROUND THE YULE LOG.



II

THE SHADOW OF CHRISTMAS PRESENT

I

It was at precisely eight o'clock, on the evening of the twenty-fourth of December, that Mr. Broadstreet yawned, glanced at the time-piece, closed the book he had been reading, and stretched himself out comfortably in his smoking-chair before the cannel fire which snapped and rustled cosily in the broad grate. The book was "A Christmas Carol," and the reader, familiar as he was with its pages, had been considerably affected by that portion relating to Tiny Tim, as well as cheered by the joyful notes with which the Carol ends.

For some minutes he sat silently surveying the pattern on his slippers, and apparently working it out again on his own brow. Now, Mr. Broadstreet was not a man to act upon impulse. A lawyer in large and profitable practice, and a shrewd man of business as well, he was never known to do, say, or decide anything without deliberation.

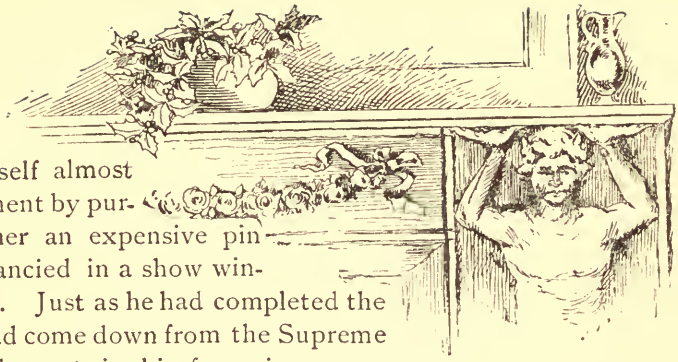
"Hold on a bit," he would say to an eager client, "softly, softly, my friend, you 're too fast for me. Now, what did you say was done with the property?" and so on to the end of the story. If there was any money in the case, Mr. Broadstreet was pretty sure to draw it out, for the benefit of his clients, and, remotely of course, himself.

"When I put my hand *down*," he was fond of remarking, with significant gesture upon the office desk, "I never take it up again without something in it."



In the course of his long practice, aided by a series of fortunate speculations, he had amassed such a goodly sum that his name stood near the head of the list of "Our Prominent Taxpayers;" he drove a fine span of horses, and was free enough with his money, in a general way. That is, when some large philanthropic movement was on foot, Alonzo M. Broadstreet, Esq., was pretty sure to be down for a round sum. He paid his share in church and politics, and annually sent a check to the Board of Foreign Missions. He made it a rule, however, never to encourage pauperism by promiscuous almsgiving, and never tried a case or gave legal advice, for love. Poor people who called at his office for assistance always found him unaccountably busy, and street beggars had long since learned to skip his door on their morning basket-visits.

To-night Mr. Broadstreet had picked up the "Carol" in a specially complacent mood. He had spent liberally in Christmas gifts for his wife and



children, letting himself almost defy his better judgment by purchasing for the former an expensive pin she had seen and fancied in a show window the week before. Just as he had completed the bargain a rescript had come down from the Supreme Court affirming judgment in his favor in a case which meant at least a five-thousand-dollar fee.

Notwithstanding the memory of his recent good luck, he continued, on this particular evening, of all evenings in the year, to knit his brows and give unmistakable evidence that some emotion or reflection, not altogether pleasant, was stirring him powerfully.

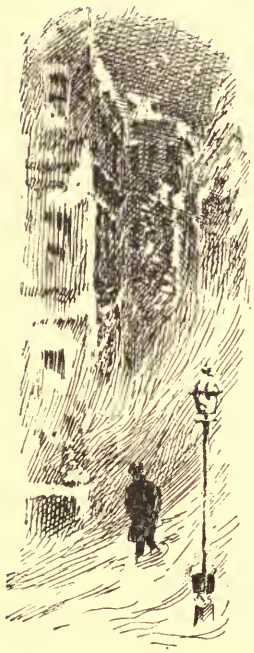
"Nonsense!" said Mr. Broadstreet presently, half aloud, as if he were addressing some one in the center of the glowing coals. "Nonsense!" he repeated, looking hard at a grotesque, carved figure that supported the mantel: "I 'm *not* like Scrooge. I give freely and I spend freely. That fire do n't look much like the one old Scrooge warmed his gruel over, does it now?"

The marble figure making no answer to this appeal, but continuing his stony gaze, Mr. Broadstreet shifted his position again uneasily. "Do n't I give away hundreds of dollars every year to the Societies, and have n't I left them a round ten thousand in my will? Won't somebody mourn for *me*, eh?"

But the carved lips replied never a word, only seeming to curl slightly as the firelight played upon them, thereby assuming such an unpleasantly scornful expression that Mr. Broadstreet began to feel more uncomfortable than ever.

Rising hastily from his chair and throwing the book down upon the table, he walked on to the window, rubbed a little place clear upon the frosty pane, and looked out.

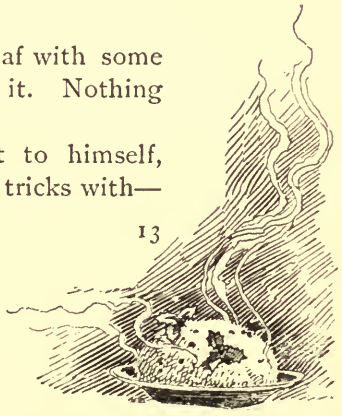
The night was gloomy enough to make the plainest of homes seem cheery by contrast. Since morning the skies had been dully gray, so that every one who went out wore arctics and carried umbrellas, and was provoked because no storm came. At about the time when the sun might be supposed to be setting, somewhere behind that dismal wall of clouds, a few tiny, shivering flakes had come floating down or up, one could hardly tell which, and had mingled with the dust that, driven by the biting wind, had filled the air, and piled itself in little ridges along the sidewalk, and blinded the eyes of men and beasts throughout the dreary day. Before long the snow overcame the low-born friend with whom it had at first treacherously allied itself, laid it prostrate on the earth, and calling in all its forces rioted victoriously over the field. The storm now took full possession of the city, whitening roofs and pavements, muffling every footfall and wheel-rattle, filling the streets up to their slaty brims with whirling mists of sleety snow, and roaring furiously through the tree-tops and around corners. As Mr. Broadstreet gazed through his frosty loophole, with mind full of the story he had just finished, he almost fancied he could discern the shadowy forms of old Marley and his fellow-ghosts moaning and wringing their hands as they swept past in trailing white robes.



He turned away with a half-shiver and once more ensconced himself in his warm easy chair, taking up the Carol as he did so, and turning its leaves carelessly until he came to a picture of the Ghost of Christmas Present. It was wonderfully well-drawn, following the text with great care, hitting off the idea of the jovial, holly-crowned Spirit to the very life. And then the heap of good things that lay in generous piles about the room! Mr. Broadstreet could almost catch a whiff of fragrance from the turkeys and geese and spicy boughs. Indeed, so strong was the illusion that he involuntarily glanced over his shoulder at the marble-topped table near by, half expecting to see an appetizing dish of eatables at his side. No one had entered, however, and the table was as usual, with only its album and gilt-mounted screen, flanked by a few books that were too choice to be hidden away on the library shelves. When he looked back at the picture in the book, he started and rubbed his eyes. He thought—but it could not have been possible—that the central figure on the page moved slightly; and he was positive that one of the Ghost's arms, in the engraving, had been raised, while now both were at his side.

Mr. Broadstreet turned back the leaf with some misgiving, and looked carefully behind it. Nothing but blank white paper.

"H'm," muttered Mr. Broadstreet to himself, "how a man's fancy does play strange tricks with—Halloo!"





He was once more glancing at the picture, when the jolly Ghost gave him an unmistakable wink.

To say that the lawyer started, was astonished, struck dumb—would be mild. He sat staring at the page, not wholly believing his own eyes, and yet not liking to look upon such a—to say the least—peculiar picture.

While he was in this bewildered state of mind a rich, jovial voice was heard, apparently at a great distance, and at the same time proceeding directly from the book he held in his hand ; and—yes, no doubt about it—the Ghost's bearded lips were moving.

" Well ? " said the Ghost of Christmas Present, still seeming very, very far off.

"Well, sir ?" stammered Mr. Broadstreet, in return.

" You see I 'm not dead yet, although some of your good people on this side of the water pay precious little attention to me."

" Why, really," said Mr. Broadstreet, instinctively arguing the opposite side of the question, " as to that, I 'm not so sure. Take Christmas cards, now. A few years ago they were unknown ; now they 're as common as valentines."

" Oh, yes," replied the Ghost, " I know. You see I have my room pretty well decorated with them."

The lawyer scrutinized the background of the picture more carefully, and, sure enough, the walls were covered with what at first seemed a rich sort of illuminated paper, but proved to be composed entirely of Christmas cards, many of which he had

never seen. Even in the momentary glance he gave, he observed that those which had taken prizes and had been most largely advertised during the past few winters, were tucked away in obscure corners, while several which were exceedingly simple in design and text occupied the most prominent positions.

"Yes," the Ghost went on, "the cards are well enough in their way, and so are the other displays and festivities of the day. But it is the spirit of Christmas that you need. Charity, charity in its good old sense; open hearts and kind deeds, with less thought of self-pleasing. While these dainty little gifts are being manufactured, purchased, sent, and thrown away, hundreds of people are at starvation's door in your own city; thousands of people know little or nothing of the real meaning of the day, or of its Founder."



As the Ghost spoke, its voice seemed to come nearer, and at the same time the book grew so large and heavy that Mr. Broadstreet was fain to set it down upon the carpet. He no longer feared the Ghost, nor did it seem strange that it should converse with him in this manner.

"Wherein are we deficient?" he asked eagerly. "Or what more can we do? The charitable institutions of Boston are among the best in the world, the sky is full of her church-steeples, her police and missionary forces are vigilant and effective in their work."

The Ghost of Christmas Present gave a toss to his long hair and beard.

"How much have *you* done to carry the spirit of Christmastide beyond your own threshold? Who in this great city will cherish the day and love it more dearly for your warm human friendship and kindly act, until it symbolizes to them whatever is purest and merriest and holiest in life?"

The Ghost's voice, now grown very near, was rather sad than stern, and its eyes were fixed intently upon Mr. Broadstreet's face.



Mr. Broadstreet hesitated. With cross-examination he was familiar enough, but he did not relish the part of witness. So confused was he that he hardly noticed that book and picture were now so large that they quite filled the end of the room in which he was sitting, and seemed like another apartment opening out of his own.

"I—I—hardly know," he stammered. "Really, I 've spent a good deal of money; my Christmas bills are always tremendous, but I suppose it 's mostly in the family."

"Mind," interrupted the Ghost, almost sharply, "I do n't say anything against the good cheer and merriment at home. But there are many homes within a stone's throw of your chair, where there will be no fine dinner, no presents, no meeting of friends, no tree,—nothing but anxiety and doubt and despair. Your dressing-gown would provide for several of them."

Mr. Broadstreet looked meekly at the embroidery upon his sleeves.

"What would you have me do?" he asked.

"Do you desire to perform your part toward making the morrow bright for some one who otherwise would find it all clouds? Do you wish to plant seeds of love and mercy and tenderness in some heart that has heretofore borne only thistles? To bring a smile to some weary face, warmth to shivering limbs, light and hope to dreary lives?"

"I do! I do!" exclaimed the rich man, eagerly starting up from his chair.

"And are you ready to sacrifice your ease and comfort, this stormy night, for such as they?"

Mr. Broadstreet seized his fur cap and ulster from the rack in the hall. "Try me!" he cried. "I 'm ready for anything!"



The Ghost smiled pleasantly upon him, at the same time seeming to lift its hand involuntarily, as in blessing. Then it spoke for the last time.

"Hitherto you have known only the bright side of Christmas," it said gently. "It has been full of joy to you and yours. But there are those among your fellow creatures, nay, among your very neighbors, who dwell in such continued misery that when Christmas comes it but reminds them of their unhappy state, and by its excess of light upon others deepens the gloom about themselves. This is the Shadow of Christmas Present, and it falls heavily upon many a heart and many a household, where the day, with its good cheer and blessed associations, should bring naught but delight." The kind Spirit's voice wavered slightly. "I, myself, can do but little to dispel this shadow. It grieves me sorely,



year by year, but it remains, and I fear I sometimes but make it worse,with my bluff ways and keen winter breezes. It is for those who love me most to carry such light and comfort to those upon whom it rests, that it shall be banished never to return. The shadow grows less year by year, but it is still broad, broad."

The Ghost was silent a moment. It beckoned to the other, and motioned to him to step behind it. "In my Shadow you shall move to-night," it concluded, in a firmer voice. "It shall accompany you wherever you go, and your work shall be to turn it away, with whatever kind deeds your hand shall find to do, or cheering words you may have the power to speak."

It said no more. Mr. Broadstreet, who, when a child, had often longed to peep behind a picture, found himself actually fulfilling his wish. As he drew nearer the printed page, he heard a dull roar, like surf beating upon a rocky coast. He advanced further, picking his way around the pile of poultry and vegetables and glistening holly upon which the Ghost sat enthroned. A moment more and the room vanished in utter blackness of night, the roar grew grander and deeper, until it throbbed in his ears like the diapason of a mighty organ, a fierce blast of snow-laden wind struck his bewildered face, the street-lamp upon the corner flickered feebly in a mist of flakes—he was standing before his own door, knee-deep in a snow-drift, and buffeted above, below, and on every side by the storm that was abroad that Christmas Eve.

II

As soon as Mr. Broadstreet recovered himself and cleared his eyes from the blinding snow, he saw a heavy, black Shadow on the sidewalk enveloping his own person and resting upon the figure of a man who had evidently just sheltered himself behind the high stone steps, for his footprints leading from the street were still quite fresh. As the man thrashed his arms and stamped vigorously, to start the blood through his benumbed feet, a bright button or two gleamed upon his breast through the cape of his greatcoat. Mr. Broadstreet now recognized him as the policeman whose beat it was, and whom he had occasionally favored with a condescending nod, as he came home late at night from the theater or the club. He had never addressed him by so much as a word, but now the Shadow was full upon him, and Mr. Broadstreet felt that here was his first opportunity.



"Good-evening, officer!" he shouted cheerily, through the storm. "Wish you a Merry Christmas to-morrow."

"Thank you, sir; same to you," replied the other, with a touch of the cap and a pleased glance at the great man. "Hard times for the boys to-night, though."

"It *is* hard," said Mr. Broadstreet compassion-



ately. "And you 're rather cold, I suppose?" he added awkwardly, after a pause.

"Rather!"

"Why, bless me," a bright thought striking him, "would n't you like a cup of hot coffee, now?"

The officer looked up again, surprised. "I would that, sir, first-rate," he answered heartily.

Mr. Broadstreet stepped to the side door and pressed the electric knob.

"Bring out a good cup of coffee for this man," he said to the girl who answered the bell. "And, officer, buy the folks at home a trifle for me; Christmas, you know." As he spoke, he put a big silver dollar into the astonished policeman's hand, and at the same time the Shadow vanished, leaving the light from the bright, warm hall falling fairly upon the snow-covered cap and buttons.

A muffled roll and jingling of bells made themselves heard above the wind, and a street-car came laboring down the street through the heavy drifts. Mr. Broadstreet, without a thought as to the destination of the car, but impelled by some unseen force, clambered upon the rear platform. The conductor was standing like a snowman, covered with white from head to foot, collar up around his ears, and hands deep in his pockets. And the Shadow was there again. Broad and gloomy, it surrounded both conductor and passenger in its bleak folds.

"Tough night, sir," remarked the former, presently.

"Yes, yes, it is, indeed," replied Mr. Broadstreet,

who was thinking what in the world he could give this man, except money. "And Christmas Eve, too!"

"That 's a fact," said the conductor. "Just the luck of it, I say. Now to-morrow I get four hours lay-off in the afternoon, and my wife, she was planning to take the children and go to the play. But they 're none of 'em over strong, and 't won't do to take 'em out in this snow. Besides, like 's not 't will storm all day."



"Children?" exclaimed Mr. Broadstreet, seeing a way out of his difficulty; "how many?"

"Two girls and a boy, all under seven."

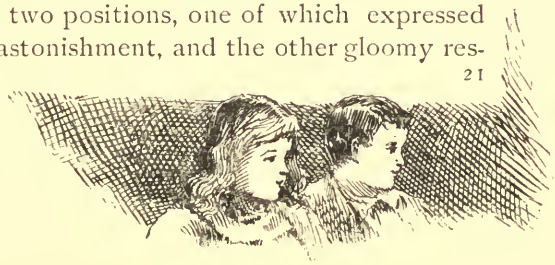
"Got any Christmas presents for them?—do n't mind my asking."

"Well, I 'd just 's lief show you what I *have* got. 'T ain't much, you know, but then it 's *somethin'*."

He stepped inside the door, laid aside his snowy mittens, and taking from the corner of the seat a small brown parcel, carefully removed the string and wrappings.

"There," he said, with a sort of pleading pride in his eyes, "I guess these 'll please 'em some. 'T aint much, you know," he added again, glancing at his passenger's fur cap, as he displayed the presents on the car-seat.

A very red-cheeked and blue-eyed doll, with a placid countenance quite out of keeping with her arms; these members being so constructed as to occupy only two positions, one of which expressed unbounded astonishment, and the other gloomy res-





ignation ; a transparent slate, with a dim cow under the glass, and "fifteen cents," plainly marked in lead pencil on one corner of the frame, and a rattle for the girl baby.

As the conductor held up these articles in his stiff, red fingers, turning the doll about so as to show her flaxen braid to the best advantage, and inducing the arms to take the positions alluded to, the Shadow crept away, and had well-nigh disappeared. But it returned again, thicker than ever, when he said, with a little choke in his voice, "I did mean to get 'em a little tree, with candles on it, and a picture-book or two ; but our pay ain't overmuch, and we had sickness, and—and"—he was very busy doing up the bundle, and very clumsy he must have been, too, for it was a long time before the wide-looped, single bow-knot was tied, and the parcel carefully put away again.

Mr. Broadstreet winked hard, and his eyes shone.

"How long before you pass here on the way back?" he asked.

"About thirty-five minutes it 'll take us to get round, sir, on account of the snow. It 's my last trip."

"Very well. Now, conductor—ahem! what did you say your name was?"

"Tryson, sir ; David Tryson."

"Then, ahem! Mr. Tryson—just ring your bell when you reach the corner there, on the up trip ; and dodge into that store where the lights are.

You 'll find a bundle waiting for you. Good-night conduct—Mr. Tryson, and a Merry Christmas to you and yours ! "

" Good-night, sir ! God bless you, sir ! Merry "— but his passenger was gone.

As he reached the sidewalk, Mr. Broadstreet turned and looked after the car. Whether it was the light from the street lamp, or the broad flood of radiance that poured out from the windows of the toy-shop just beyond, he could not tell ; but the rear platform was illuminated by a pure, steady glow, in the very center of which stood the conductor, smiling and waving his hand. No sign of a Shadow ; not a bit of it. Mr. Broadstreet looked carefully about him, but it was nowhere to be seen. Even the snow, which all this time continued to fall without interruption, seemed to fill the air with tiny lamps of soft light.



Ah, that toy-shop ! Such heaps of blocks, and marbles, and sleds ; such dolls with eyes that would wink upside down, exactly like a hen's; such troops of horses and caravans of teams ; such jangling of toy pianos, and tooting of toy horns, and shrieking of toy whistles, (these instruments being anxiously tested by portly papas and mammas, apparently to be sure of a good bargain, but really for the fun of the thing); such crowds of good-natured people, carrying canes, and drums, and hoop-sticks under their arms, taking and giving thrusts of these articles and being constantly pushed and pulled and jammed and trodden upon with the most delightful

good humor; such rows of pretty girls behind the counters, now climbing to the summits of Ararats where innumerable Noah's Arks, of all sizes, had been stranded; all these girls being completely used up with the day's work, of course, but more cheerful and willing than ever, bless them! such scamperings to and fro of cash-boys, and diving into the crowd, and emergings in utterly unexpected places —were never seen before in this quiet old city.

Mr. Broadstreet embarked on the current, and with an unconsciously benevolent smile on his round face was borne half-way down the store before he could make fast to a counter.

"What can I do for you, sir?" If the girlish voice was brisk and businesslike it was at the same time undeniably pleasant.

Mr. Broadstreet started. "Why, I want some presents; Christmas presents, you know," he said, looking down into the merry brown eyes.

"Boy or girl, sir, and how old?"



Mr. Broadstreet was fairly taken aback by her promptness. His wife always did the Christmas shopping.

"Let me see," he began hurriedly; "two girls and a—no, I mean two boys—why, bless me," he went on in great confusion, as her low laugh rang out among the woolly sheep with which she happened to be surrounded, "I 've really forgotten. That is—Oh, I see; you need n't laugh," and Mr. Broadstreet's own smile broadened as he spoke, "they 're not mine. I never heard of them until five minutes

ago, and I declare I do n't remember which is which. At any rate there are three of them, all under seven."

"How would a lamb do for the oldest? Real wool and natural motion?" in proof of which latter assertion she set all their heads nodding in the most violent manner, until it made her customers quite dizzy to look at them. Mr. Broadstreet picked out the biggest one. "He seems to—ah—bow more vigorously than the rest," he said.

The girl then proceeded to display various toys and gay-colored picture-books, Mr. Broadstreet assenting to the choice in every instance, until a large, compact bundle lay on the counter, plainly marked,

"*Mr. Tryson, Conductor. To be called for.*"

As the lawyer was leaving the store, he remembered something, and turned back.

"I forgot," he said, "I wanted to buy a tree"—

"Just round the corner," interrupted the brown-eyed girl over her shoulder, without looking at him. She was already deep in the confidence of the next customer, who had told her the early history of two of her children, and was now proceeding to the third. Mr. Broadstreet buttoned up his coat collar, and stepped out once more into the storm. A few moments' walk brought him to a stand where the trees were for sale. And what a spicy, fragrant, delicious, jolly place it was, to be sure! The sidewalk was flanked right and left with rows upon rows of



spruce, pine and fir trees, all gayly decked with tufts of snow; every doorway, too, was full of these trees, as if they had huddled in there to get out of the storm. Here and there were great boxes overflowing with evergreen and holly boughs, many of which the dealers had taken out and stuck into all sorts of crannies and corners of their stands, so that the glossy leaves and scarlet berries glistened in the flaring light of the lamps. Wreaths of every size and description—some made of crispy gray moss, dotted with bright amaranths, some of holly—were threaded upon sticks like beads, and were being constantly pulled off and sold to the muffled customers who poured through the narrow passageway in a continuous stream.

"All brightness," thought Mr. Broadstreet, "and no Shadow this time."

None? What was that black ugly-looking stain on the fallen snow, extending from his own feet to one of the rude wooden stands where traffic was busiest? Mr. Broadstreet started, and scrutinized it sharply. He soon discovered the outline of Christmas Present. Beyond a doubt it was the Shadow again.

III

It must be confessed that for a moment Mr. Broadstreet felt slightly annoyed. Why should that Thing be constantly starting up and darkening his cheerful mood? It was bad enough that the

Shadow should exist, without intruding its melancholy length upon people who were enjoying Christmas Eve. He might have indulged in still further discontent, when he noticed the head of the Shadow-figure droop as in sadness. He remembered the kind Ghost's grief, and upbraided himself for his hardness of heart.

"Forgive me," he said, half aloud. "I was wrong. I forgot. I will, please God, brighten this spot and turn away the Shadow!"

Without further delay he advanced through the gloomy space until he reached the box, upon which a large lot of holly wreaths and crosses were displayed. He soon completed the purchase of a fine thick fir, and sent it, together with a roll of evergreens, to the toy-shop, directed like the parcel to the conductor.



The owner of the stand was a jovial, bright-faced young fellow, and it was evident that to him Christmas meant only gladness and jollity. But the Shadow still rested upon Mr. Broadstreet and all the snowy sidewalk about him. He was thoroughly puzzled to find its object, and had almost begun to consider the whole affair a delusion, when his eyes fell upon an odd little man, standing in the shelter of the trees, and visibly shaking with the cold, although his coat was tightly buttoned about his meager form, and his old hat pulled down over his ears. As he saw the portly lawyer looking at him he advanced timidly and touched his hat.



"Can I carry a bundle for you, sir?" he asked, his teeth chattering as he spoke.

"Why, I'm afraid not," said Mr. Broadstreet. "I've just sent away all my goods."

The man's face fell. He touched his hat again and was humbly turning away, when the other laid his hand lightly on his shoulder.

"You seem to be really suffering with the cold, my friend," he said in such gentle tones that his "learned brothers upon the other side" would not have recognized it; "and that 's a little too bad for Christmas Eve."

"Christmas! Christmas!" shivered the man with a little moan, wringing his thin hands, "what is that to me! What is that to a man whose wife is dying for want of tender nursing and wholesome food? whose children are growing up to a life of misery and degradation? whose own happiness is gone, gone, so long ago that he has forgotten the feeling of it?"

Mr. Broadstreet patted the shoulder gently. "Come, come," he said, trying to speak cheerily; "it is n't so bad as that, you know. Times are better, and there 's plenty of work."

"Work!" cried the man bitterly. "Yes, for the friends of the rich; for the young and strong; for the hopeful, but not for me. I tell you, sir," he continued, raising his clenched fist until the ragged sleeve fell back and left his long, gaunt wrist bare in the biting wind, "I 've walked from end to end of Boston, day after day, answer-



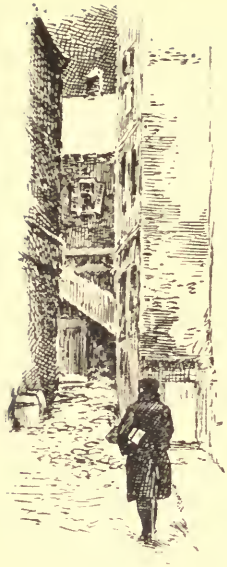
ing every advertisement, applying for any kind of honorable employment; but not even the city will take me to shovel snow in the streets, and I 'm discouraged, discouraged."

To Mr. Broadstreet's dismay, the poor fellow suddenly hid his face in his hands, and broke down in a tempest of sobs.

Ah, how dark the Shadow was then! The storm had ceased, but the keen northwest wind still swept the streets, filling the air with fine, icy particles of snow, and driving to their warm homes those who had remained down town to make their last purchases.

The man shivered and sobbed by turns, and was quite the sport of the wind, which was buffeting him with its soft, cruel paws; when suddenly the world seemed to grow warmer. He felt something heavy and soft upon his back and around his neck. Mechanically thrusting his arms through the sleeves which opened to meet them, and looking up in amazement, he beheld his new friend standing upon the sidewalk in his dressing-gown, a genial smile upon his beaming face, and his hand outstretched. The lawyer laughed gleefully at his consternation.

"It 's all right," he said, as the Discouraged Man tried to pull off the ulster and return it to its owner. "I 'm warmer than ever. Come on, let 's go home and see your wife and children. Do n't stop to talk!" and seizing the other by the hand, or rather the cuff of his sleeve, which was much too long for him,



he hurried him off, snatching a couple of wreaths from the stand as he went by, and dropping a half-dollar in their place.

It was a strange experience for the proud lawyer, that walk through the dark streets, floundering among snow-drifts, slipping, tumbling, scrambling along over icy sidewalks and buried crossings, the long-skirted gown flapping about his heels in the most ridiculous way. He kept his eyes steadily fixed on the Shadow, which was always before him, now turning down a side street, now doubling on itself, ever growing more and more distinct, and drawing its two followers farther and farther into the lowest quarter of the city. The stars were out now, and seemed to flicker in the fierce wind like the gas-lights upon the street corners. Mr. Broadstreet felt curiously warm without his ulster and as light-hearted as a boy.

As they passed through the most brilliantly-lighted streets, however, he saw much that filled him for the moment with sadness. For the Shadow now grew enormously large, and rested upon many places. It brooded darkly over the brilliant saloons that lined the way, and that clothed themselves in the very garments of Christmas to attract the innocent and foolish, so that, drawn by the sheen of holly and evergreen, and the show of festivities and good cheer, they might enter and find their own destruction. Oftentimes, too, the Shadow flitted along the street in company with some man or woman who to all outward appearance was calm and



content with life; perhaps even happy, one would have said. In the black folds of the Shadow, brutal-faced ruffians hid their bleared eyes; houses were draped as in some time of national mourning; once, the slight, pretty figure of a young girl came up, wearing the Shadow flauntingly about her neck, like a scarf; she stopped, and seemed about to address Mr. Broadstreet with bold words. As she met his kind, pitying glance, however, her own eyes fell, her lips quivered, she drew the Shadow about her face and fled. Alas! he could do nothing for such as her, unless that gentle, fatherly face should come before her again, in her solitude, and, by its silent eloquence, lead her to better things.

While Mr. Broadstreet was peering about for the Shadow, and taking into his heart the lessons it taught, he had not been idle, giving a kind word or a bit of money or a pleasant glance wherever the chance offered.

The Shadow now paused before a narrow doorway in a crooked little street, and the two, or rather the three, for the Shadow went before them, entered and mounted the stairway. Mr. Broadstreet stumbled several times, but the Discouraged Man went up like one who was well used to the premises. As they reached the third landing, a voice somewhere near them commenced to sing feebly, and they stopped to listen.

"It 's Annette," whispered the Discouraged Man; "she 's singing for me. It was a way she had when we were first married, and I used to like it, coming

home from a hard day's work; so she 's tried to keep it up ever since. Do you hear her, sir?"

Yes, Mr. Broadstreet heard her. Poor, poor little thin voice, trembling weakly on the high notes and avoiding the low ones altogether. It was more like a child's than a woman's, and so tired—so tired! He fumbled in his dressing-gown pocket and turned his head away; quite needlessly, for it was very dark.

The two men remained silent for a moment, listening to the echo of the gay young voice with which the little bride used to greet her husband; she, so tender, and loving, and true; he, so strong, and brave, and hopeful for the future! And as they listened, they caught the words:

> "Christ was born on Christmas Day,
> Wreathe the holly, twine the bay,
> Carol Christmas joyfully,
> The Babe, the Son, the Holy One of Mary."

"That 's a new one," whispered the Discouraged Man again, delightedly. "She never sang it before. She must have learned it on purpose for to-night!"

There was a weary little pause within the room; she wondering, perhaps, why he didn't come in. Presently she began again, and her voice had grown strangely weak, so that they could hardly hear it, in the rush of the wind outside the building:

> "Let the bright red berries glow,
> Everywhere—in goodly show"—

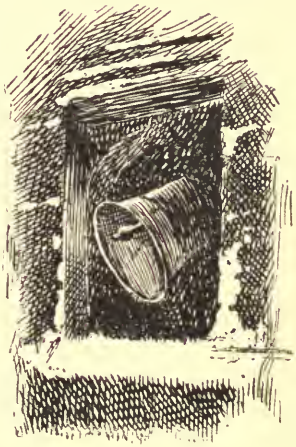
It died away into a mere whisper, and then ceased entirely.



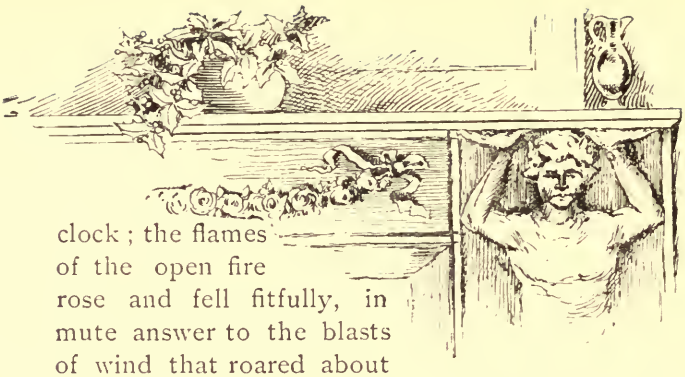
Mr. Broadstreet hesitated no longer, but touched his companion's arm, and they both entered.

She was lying on a rude bed in the corner of the room, her eyes closed, and her hands folded upon her breast. A look of agony swept across the face of her husband as he knelt beside her, taking her cold hands—ah, so thin! in his own, chafing and kissing them by turns.

Above his head on the whitewashed wall was the word "*John*," in large, bright letters. It was his name; she had crept from her bed and traced it with her finger-tip upon the frosty window-pane, so that the light from a far-off street lamp shone through the clear lines, and thus reproduced them upon the opposite wall. Just beneath was "*Merry Christmas.*" She thought it would please him, and seem like a sort of decoration, hung there above her bed. And now he was kneeling by her side, and holding her thin hands. Perhaps he was more discouraged than ever, just then. O Shadow, Shadow, could you not have spared him this?



Mr. Broadstreet hung the wreaths he had brought upon the bed-post, and waited helplessly. A mist gathered in his eyes, so that he could not see; the walls of the little dismal chamber wavered to and fro, the Shadow grew more and more dense until it seemed to assume definite shape, the shape of Christmas Present, sitting as before, enthroned amidst plenty and good cheer; the deep-toned bells in a neighboring church-tower slowly and solemnly tolled twelve strokes, answered by the silver chime of a



clock ; the flames of the open fire rose and fell fitfully, in mute answer to the blasts of wind that roared about the chimney top. The Ghost dwindled rapidly, the Discouraged Man assumed the proportions and appearance of a marble figure under the mantel, and Mr. Broadstreet, starting up in affright, found himself standing in his own warm room, the Christmas Carol still open at the wonderful picture in his hand. The air still vibrated with the last echoes of the midnight-bell. It was Christmas morning.

Not many hours later, the glad sun was shining brightly over the white-robed city, sprinkling the streets and housetops with diamond-dust, gleaming upon the golden spires of churches, seeking out every dark and unwholesome corner with its noiseless step, and dispensing with open hand its bounty of purity and warmth. Yet the shadow was there, even on that fairest of Christmas Days,—and Mr. Broadstreet knew it.

Throughout the day he was thoughtful and abstracted, and during the following weeks he was observed to act in the most unaccountable manner. On snowy evenings he would dodge out of the house without the slightest warning, and return shortly after with damp boots and a defeated air.

Upon the street-cars Mr. Broadstreet became famous that winter for his obliging manner and

pleasant ways with the employees. Indeed, he more than once persisted in remaining on the platform with the conductor at the imminent risk of freezing his ears and nose, until he was fairly driven within doors.

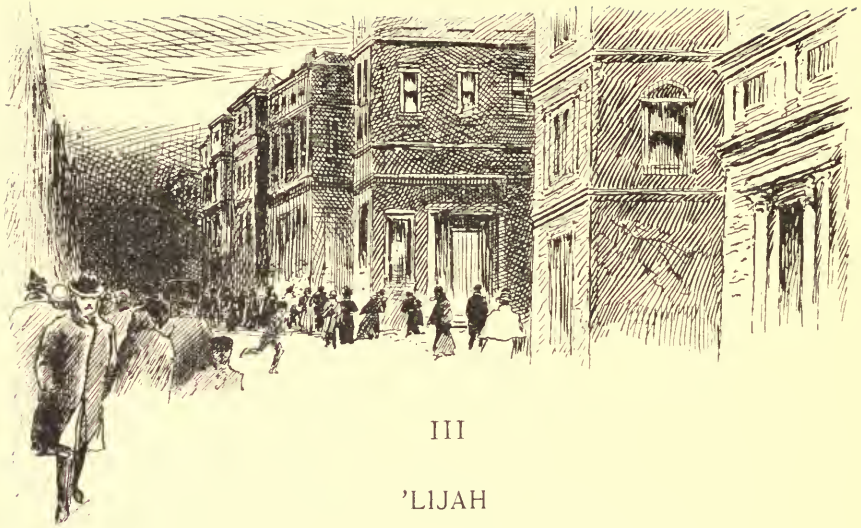
Down town he behaved still more queerly, leaving the office long before dark, and being discovered in the oddest places imaginable; now diving into narrow courts, and up steep staircases, now plunging into alleyways and no thoroughfares; and returning home late to dinner, greatly exhausted, with little or no money in his pockets. In these days, too, he began to talk about the sufferings of the poor, the abuses of the liquor law, the need of strong, pure women to go among the outcasts of our great, troubled city and perform Christlike deeds.

One bitter cold night he was much later than usual. It had been snowing heavily, and his wife had begun to worry a little over the absence of her husband, when she heard the click of his key in the front door. When Mr. Broadstreet entered, sprinkled with snow from head to foot, what was her amazement to see him standing there with fur cap and gloves, and a glowing face, but no ulster!

"Alonzo, Alonzo," she cried, from the head of the stairs, "what will you forget next? Where have you left it?"

"Why," said he simply, "I 've found the Discouraged Man. And the doctor at the hospital says she 'll get well, after all."





III

'LIJAH

TWILIGHT, December twilight in a great city, cold gray and dismal. Up town the dust collected in little ridges at the street corners, and whirled alike into the faces of rich and poor, on their way home from work. Down town the clerks in the big stores had gone out to their suppers, leaving the boys to light up and rearrange the disheveled counters for the final rush of evening customers. Around the markets and in the toy-shops, however, there was little rest. Crowds of tired, good-natured people staggered against each other and entangled themselves in all sorts of projecting bundles which they carried under their arms. Now and then a messenger or expressman would call out, "Clear the way there!" in rich, jovial tones, while he bore his armful of glistening, scarlet-dotted holly through the thickest of the crowd. Even the night wind, which came scurrying down from the northwest evidently bent on mischief, stopped a moment to rest among the boughs

of the mimic evergreen forest of fir and spruce along the sidewalks, refreshed itself with their spicy fragrance, and stole away again, gentler than before. And when, of all the year, should eyes be brighter, hopes higher, voices merrier, even wind and winter air more mild than on this blessed night?—for it was Christmas Eve.

"B-r-r-r-r," shivered 'Lijah, trying to pull down the ragged ends of his sleeves over his black wrist; "dis yere 's what I call right cold. Gwine to snow 'fore mo'nin,' for sho.'"

Plunging a small shovel into the tin pail he was carrying, the old man proceeded to scatter its contents, a sort of earthy gravel, along the slippery rails of the horse-car track.

"Hullo, 'Lijah!" called a passing driver, with one hand on his brake and the other holding a tight rein, "where you goin' to-morrow?"

"Dunno; Merry Chris'mus!" returned the other, straightening his old back and waving a salute with his shovel.



One after another greeted him in much the same way, receiving the invariable "Merry Chris'mus," given with a broad smile and a momentary gleam of white from eyes and teeth.

The pail was empty, and 'Lijah was about to leave the scene of his day's work, when a strong, young voice called to him.

"Evening, 'Lijah. Wish you a Merry Christmas!"

"Thank ye, thank ye, mars' George," cried the

negro, answering involuntarily in the old plantation dialect, and turning delightedly to the newcomer. "Wh-whar you been, Mars,' an' how 's Miss Rosy?"

"She 's well, 'Lijah," said the young man, with a sparkle in his eye. "I 've been away from the city for a month. To-night I was going up there, but"—

"But what, but what, Mars' George?" queried the old man eagerly. "Ef a po' ole nig kin do anything fer ye, he 'll do it sho'. *Anything*, Mars'!"

George Farley looked at him kindly. "I know you would, 'Lijah. And yet, I hardly know—if I had n't been away so long"—

He was a generous young fellow, and he wanted to do right both by his employers and his humble companion. The fact was, he had been charged to remain in the store that night, the regular watchman being at home sick. He had been looking forward during his long absence on the road to that very Christmas Eve, which he was to spend with the owner of a certain pair of merry brown eyes, at the other end of the city. The temptation was too great. "It won't come again for a year," he argued to himself; "it won't ever be just the same as to-night. One hour or two would do no harm, and 'Lijah is as faithful as a watch-dog—better than I would be, if anything."



The result was, as may easily be imagined, that 'Lijah agreed to take up his post at the store at just half-past seven, and remain until Farley came, which would be before ten.

The old man made his way home through the

darkening streets with many a delighted chuckle at his good luck. A chance to serve Mars' George did n't come every day. "He 's a-gwine ter trus' me!" he said to himself over and over again.

The strong attachment between these two men, so far removed from each other in social position, but closely knit together by that brotherliness of humanity which reaches to a depth—or height—where there is neither rich nor poor, bond nor free, —this powerful attachment had begun at a summer hotel a year before. Farley had been walking idly about the reading-rooms and office, when he heard a cracked voice crooning softly to itself. Something in the tones attracted him, and he was interested enough to listen for the words of the song, for the tune told him nothing.

"Wash me an' I shall be
Whiter dan snow."



Stepping into the next room he found the singer to be an old negro, employed about the place to black boots, scrub floors, and perform whatever menial duties were considered below the dignity of his fellow-servants. His hair was powdered with white, and his face wrinkled like a prune, but there was a light in his eye which told that he was mindful of the words he sang. Farley was touched by their association with both his race and the tasks to which he was put, and entered into conversation with him. He found that 'Lijah, for so he was called, was receiving a mere pittance from the hotel,



and even that would cease in a few weeks. Interesting himself thoroughly in the old man, he obtained for him a comfortable boarding-place in the city and a situation which befitted his years and sluggish movements, and, while affording but small pay, gave steady work from one year's end to another.

So 'Lijah plodded humbly up and down the tracks, scattering his shovelfuls of sand, dodging passing vehicles as he best might, and living at peace with all men. Oftentimes Mars' George, to whom, as his only tie in the world, he was as devoted as a Newfoundland dog, would spend the long winter evenings with him in his little room; or would even take him to a fairy play, whose fascinations affected him so powerfully that for days afterward he would occasionally be seen to stop at his work, gazing steadfastly at the pavements, from which, perhaps, he momentarily expected to see emerge a gnome or gauze-winged naiad.

Meanwhile he was full of interest in all that most nearly concerned the happiness of his friend and patron. Accordingly it was not long after Miss Rosy Burnham appeared on the scene, that old 'Lijah took occasion to slyly allude to the personal charms of the young lady, and to offer his services as a message-bearer, whenever occasion might arise.

Once 'Lijah had the supreme delight of nursing Farley through a short but severe illness. Then it was that his musical accomplishments, which had at first attracted his benefactor, again came into play. His repertoire, it is true, was scant, including only



"Whiter than Snow," which he had heard at one of Mr. Moody's revival meetings, and "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot," doubtless a relic of the old days when the slaves sang at their work in the cotton-fields, or among the huts at night. Of tune he knew absolutely nothing, and the different airs which he improvised for the words, according to the mood he was in, gave the effect of a much greater variety than the two hymns would otherwise have afforded.

To-night he was as happy as a child, and went to and fro about the house humming, to a tune which seemed a combination of "Dixie" and "Coronation"

> "Swing low,—swing low—
> Comin' fer ter carry me ho-o-ome."

All the way down to the store after supper he murmured by turns "Sweet Chariot," and "Mars' George done trus' me sho'ly!" People noticed his lightsome looks, and some one must have given him a sprig of holly, which he wore proudly, after all the berries had dropped off, in his buttonhole.

Arriving at the store he found Farley waiting impatiently for him, and was at once instructed in the duties of his two-hours' watch. He was to sit in the main office, which was in the third story and looked out upon a large street. Every fifteen minutes he must take a lantern and patrol the entire building above the first floor, which was occupied by another firm, furniture dealers and manufacturers.

"Here, 'Lijah," said Farley, hurriedly drawing a bunch of keys from his pocket and thrusting them

into the other's hands; "take these. That flat key will open the safe, and in it—look—is this box, containing the most valuable papers in the store. If anything happens be sure to look after them. Now good-bye, old fellow. Do n't go to sleep, and look out for me inside of two hours." And he was gone.

'Lijah listened to his retreating footsteps with intense satisfaction.

"Hi! Ain't dis a Chris'mus Eve fer ole 'Lijah!" he said, softly, taking a survey of his surroundings, and proceeding to settle himself in one of the most uncomfortable chairs in the room.



Pretty soon he looked at the clock. The hand indicated exactly half-past seven.

"Reck'n I 'll begin dis yere business on time," he soliloquized, picking up the lantern Farley had left for him.

It would have been laughable, and pathetic at the same time, had any one been there to see how anxiously he peered into every corner for signs of danger; scrutinizing the door mats, gravely pausing before tables and desks, giving a comprehensive glance now and then at the ceiling, stepping on tiptoe, and, with eyes as round as saucers, listening as he approached each door. This entire performance he repeated regularly on the quarter-hours, as Farley had told him; his features relaxing into his gleeful chuckle each time, as he found himself in the cosy office, with all well behind him.

Meanwhile the hands of the clock upon the wall crept round in leisurely fashion to nine, half-past,

ten; and 'Lijah's broad, white smile expanded further and further as no Farley appeared.

"He 's done trus' me lots dis yere night, sho'ly," he repeated again. "Guess you 's a tol'able good watchman, po' ole 'Lijah, you is. Hi! dat 's some o' Miss Rosy's work, sho' 'nuff!"



He had finished his quarter-past-ten round, and had been sitting for some time in his straight-backed chair, singing softly to himself, and ruminating on Mars' George's manifold virtues and the fair face of his lady, and was watching the clock for the signal of his next survey of the premises, when he noticed a peculiar effect in the upper portion of the room. The ceiling seemed to be going farther and farther away, lifting higher and higher. Was he falling asleep then, after all, like an unfaithful sentinel? He sat bolt upright, rubbed his smarting eyes, and looked up again. The ceiling was almost out of sight. At the same moment the old negro was seized with a violent fit of coughing. He sprang to his feet, trembling in every limb. There was no longer any mystery about it; the room was rapidly filling with smoke, which poured in steadily through the transom over the office door.

'Lijah stood a moment and tried to think. Then he ran, lantern in hand, into the entry and down the stairs, uttering incoherent cries of "O Lor'! O Mars' George! Look yere, look yere! O 'Lijah, you wuf'less ole—O Lor', O Lor'!" Scrambling, tumbling, sliding, he found his way down through the stifling smoke, which boiled up in an ever-



increasing volume from the basement. Reaching the street, 'Lijah ran plump into a policeman, and, his teeth chattering with terror, tried to tell him what was the matter.

But his haste was needless, for even while he spoke, deep voices were repeating 'Lijah's message in solemn, measured tones, above the roofs all over the city; a low roar, growing louder each instant, arose far down the street. Louder and louder, mingled with a jangling of gongs and dismal blowing of horns, as the mighty foes of the fire gathered to their work. Suddenly the crowd, which seemed to have sprung up out of the ground, fled to right and left. A magnificent pair of black horses dashed fiercely up before the store, leaving behind them a long trail of floating sparks from the beautiful, glistening creature of brass and steel at their backs. Then came one piece of apparatus after another, engines, ladders and hose. In the confusion and uproar of their arrival, the policeman had quite forgotten the trembling old black man and his lantern. Now he looked around and saw him crowding his way toward the store, from which tongues of flame began to dart viciously.

"Come back there!" shouted the officer sternly, rushing upon 'Lijah and jerking him backward so that he nearly fell. "Do n't you see the stairway 's all on fire?"

"B-b-but Mars' George done trus' "—

"I do n't know anything about that," interrupted the policeman, pushing back the crowd to right and



left. "You can't go in there again, and that 's all there is about it."

A determined look came into 'Lijah's dark face. He stopped shaking and watched his chance. It came soon, and with a movement wonderfully quick for such an old man, he darted through the line and toward the burning building.

"Stop him! Stop the nigger!" shouted half a dozen voices. "He 's crazy!"

Two or three firemen sprang forward, but it was too late. An involuntary and audible shudder went through the crowd as he plunged into the black stairway, stooping to avoid the flames which curled around the posts above his head.

In another minute some one cried out, "Look, look! there he is, way up in the third story!"

How he had made his way through that terrible barrier, no one ever knew. There he was, gesticulating wildly at the window, shouting to the firemen, and presently holding up what appeared to be a small box. With a warning cry to those below, he dropped it, watched it as it fell and was borne safely out of danger by a uniformed officer,—and sank back upon the window sill. Those in the opposite building afterward said they could see then that he was terribly burned, but seemed in all his pain to be laughing to himself. They thought, as did the crowd below, that he was insane.

All this time the firemen were attacking the fire upon every side, but with no visible effect. The varnish and oils stored by the furniture dealers in



various portions of their establishment made rallying points for the flames, which almost at the very outset had found their way through the central staircase, and so up and out of the roof. Every front window in the two lower stories poured forth its volume of fire and smoke, so that no ladders could be successfully planted. Nor could entrance be effected through the skylight, the enemy having, as I have described, taken possession of that important point. Meanwhile old 'Lijah seemed quite content to sit just inside his window and wait for what was coming fast. His grizzled head drooped gradually, and those nearest could see his lips moving. If they had been very near indeed, they would have heard him talking and singing to himself:

"'Swing low, sweet chari-o-t,
Comin' fer to carry me home!'

I 'se done it, Mars' George, jes' 's you tole me. You done trus' 'Lijah, an' he war n't a-gwine to give up.

"'Whiter dan sno-o-ow! Swing low!'"

Yes, old 'Lijah, your chariot is swinging low for you, very low.

"Comin' fer to carry me"—

The thick smoke rolls out heavily through the window overhead. The firemen keep a steady stream playing through the broken panes, and fight fiercely with their axes to reach him. It grows so hot that the people in the opposite windows hold their hands before their faces, while they watch.

Still nearer swings the great roaring chariot of fire. Lower and lower droops the faithful head upon the black, scorched hands.

His lips were still moving faintly, and he was still whispering, "Swing low, swing low, swing low," when CRASH! came a burly figure, his face blackened with smoke and his rubber coat dripping with water, straight in through the window. Without a word he seized 'Lijah firmly around the waist and raised himself upright on the window-sill; then looking upward he shouted, hoarsely, "Haul away!"



The crowd held their breath as the two figures swung out into the air at that fearful height, and spun round once or twice before they were drawn up—up—inch by inch, and landed safe and sound on the roof. Then up went such a shout as has rarely been heard in this good city; a great, beautiful, manly cry of triumph and joy, such as the angels might utter over him who was lost.

It was a long time before 'Lijah could realize that he had not been borne away in his chariot, that had swung so low. I believe he felt a pang of disappointment when he first looked at his wrinkled, scarred hands, and found they were not "whiter than snow." But Rosy, dear, repentant little Rosy, soon found ways to comfort him; for she would not hear of his staying in the hospital, because she knew it was all her fault, she said, keeping George so long. So 'Lijah is quite as content to stay on the earth a little while longer as he was to go. For does not Mars' George come every

evening and sit by him, and tell him they must live together always? and does n't 'Lijah know, too, that the crowning glory of his life is to be on next Christmas Eve, just a year from the great fire, when Miss Rosy will be Miss Rosy no longer, and he is to enter upon permanent duties in her new home?





IV

A CHRISTMAS REVERIE

It was growing late, on a certain December evening, when I put on my dressing-gown and slippers, turned off the gas, drew my easy chair up in front of the blazing wood fire, and settled back with a long breath of comfort, thanking my lucky stars that work was over, for that day at any rate. Not that any stars were in sight, lucky or otherwise. In the first place, the windows were covered with a heavy, fuzzy layer of frost, except up in one corner where I could n't possibly look out without climbing into a chair; and in the next place, even if I had raised the sash, which I was by no means inclined to do, I should have seen nothing but a great, white, howling blur of snow, tossing and foaming between the brick walls which confined it, like the rapids of Niagara.

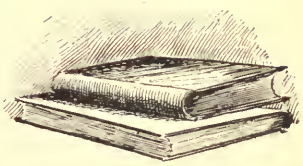
In fact the wind was with difficulty kept outside at all, and at intervals would knock savagely at the frosted pane, or shout down the chimney, to the great amusement of the good-humored fire.

Now if there is anything I particularly like, it is the sound of a furious northeaster in the chimney on such a night as this. So I sat there, watching the dancing flames, feeling the grateful warmth beginning to creep through the soles of my slippers, and listening to my boisterous friend outside, when I became conscious of a curious optical effect in one of the black marble pillars which supported my mantel. As the shadows flitted to and fro about its Ionic scrolls, it looked exactly as if it were nodding its head, and the fringe of the lambrequin hung out over its forehead like a mass of disheveled hair. Yielding myself wholly to the queer fancy, I was not at all surprised to have the pillar straighten itself up until it was nearly six feet tall, and ask me in rather a severe voice what I meant by translating *notus*, "northeast wind?"

"I did n't mean to, sir," I stammered, feeling all at once greatly in awe of the projecting tuft of hair that loomed up threateningly over me. "I suppose it was because it was snowing, and the northeast wind is really"— Here I paused, for I happened to glance at the window as I spoke, and behold, there was no sign of frost or snow on the dusty pane. I looked foolish and—I had scrambled to my feet when the question was asked—sat down hastily.



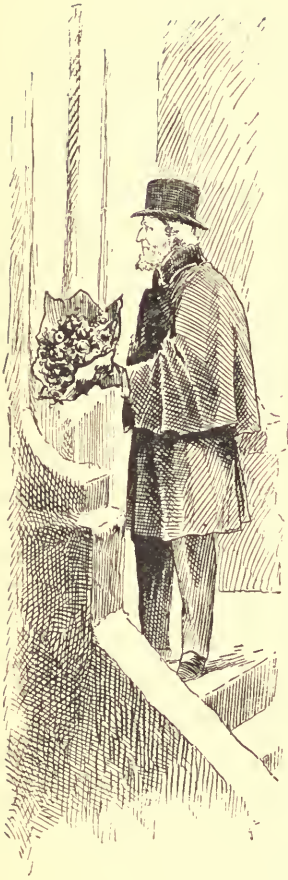
"Next!" said the tall figure, bending its dark brows on a boy who had glided in unobserved and taken his seat beside me. While he was translating in a hesitating and monotonous voice what



seemed to be a passage from Virgil, I had time to look about me, at the same time experiencing an odd sensation of waking up after a long sleep. It had been a wild, strange dream, then,—my college life, my adventures abroad, my business and its cares. Yes, even the few gray hairs that had begun to peep around my ears were but fancied symptoms of maturity and age. For here I was, where of course I ought to be, sitting on a hard bench, Virgil in hand, following the recitation and reading ahead hurriedly about where I thought my turn would come. Every moment the scene became more natural, and the dream-life of my manhood more and more indistinct. The old head master, Francis Gardner, whom I now recognized beyond all doubt, soon reached my end of the class once more, but before he could call on me to translate, the hands of the clock touched eleven, and we were dismissed for recess.

Down we poured over the long, worn staircase, which trembled under our tread, one flight after another, until we reached the yard. Here we played our old games, running to and fro between the high brick walls, and dodging around their sharp angles. At length the bell—I can hear its exact tones now—called to us from a window overhead, and we scrambled up again, taking our places at our desks with just as much bustle and interchange of sly thrusts as we dared. One boy was late, and the Doctor met him at the threshold.

"Now, sir," said he sternly, looking down at the



culprit, and fixing upon him a glance which I never knew to fail of inspiring awe, "Now, sir, do you want a rasping?" The boy shuffled his feet back and forth on the floor, twisted his hat in his hands, and began to mumble an excuse.

"Look here," said the tall figure, "you can take either of the two horns of the dilemma," holding up two fingers. "Either you went so far away that you could n't hear the bell, or you did n't start when you did hear it. Which horn will you take?"

How that boy trembled as he surveyed those long, gaunt fingers on which hung his fate! Foolish fellow, not to know the warm heart that was beating behind all the kind old Doctor's frowns! For do I not remember his many gentle deeds, often done in secret and found out by accident? It seems only yesterday, when, having sent one of his scholars away in disgrace, and learned a few days later that the boy was at home and sick, he had misgivings that he had been unjust, and appeared at that boy's door after school hours with a bouquet at least a foot in diameter, and the injunction—awkwardly enough given—that the boy should not be worried about what had occurred, nor about the lessons he was losing. Feeble as he was, with age and disease fast laying hold upon him, the head master had traversed the entire breadth of the city in the dead of winter to leave this message for the pupil he feared he had wronged.

While I was reflecting upon these things the

Doctor had finished his rebuke to the tardy boy and left the room. Others came and went. The boys' faces were all familiar, and my heart brimmed over with delight as I recognized those whom, in my dream of college and business, I had thought of as sober, work-a-day men. Here was the round-eyed, mischievous fellow whom I had fancied to be a learned physician ; another, a librarian ; a third, a student and teacher of German, but now, bereft of whiskers and bass voice, once more a boy, and the scapegrace of the class. Then there were the teachers. One, whose fair, scholarly face I had never expected to see again on this earth, was busily explaining a Latin exercise to the class, with the aid of several old vellum-bound books he had brought from his own private library. Another bustled in with a carpetbag and a hearty, cheery air ; compared the school clock with his watch (of whose almost superhuman accuracy we boys always stood in awe), and heard us recite in French. This lesson passed off with a briskness and good will that waked us all up as if we had been out in the fresh air, and left us keen for the next study. Meanwhile I caught glimpses of other teachers, all more or less associated with the dearest and best days of my life. There was he who once invited us all out to skate on his pond, in the country ; who knew how to be stern with wrong-doers, but who was known to stay late in the afternoon, day after day, to hear a sick boy recite lessons in his home, that the little fellow might not fall behind his class, and so lose a possible



chance for a prize. In my after-dream, his hair had been threaded with gray ; but now it was brown, as I remembered it of old. Still another was a young man whose even-handed justice—" squareness," we used to call it—was proverbial among my schoolmates. I had heard that his own son had since grown old enough to pass through college most honorably, and that he himself had taken the place of the grim Doctor in some strange air-castle of a new schoolhouse, far from its former site. Now I realized that I was back in the old days, and laughed to myself so loud that nothing but a disingenuous cough, into which I dexterously turned my mirth, saved me a mark for misconduct.



But now the room was hushed, as the master addressed us in quiet, earnest tones. He was bidding us good-bye for a few days, and ended by wishing us all a Merry Christmas.

Bless me, how we did throng around the desk on our way out, and return his hearty greeting! In spite of my sense of the reality of the whole scene, I could not dispel a strange foreboding that I was saying farewell to school and master forever. The twilight shadows of the short winter afternoon—it was storming furiously now, and had grown quite dark within doors—gathered about the old man's form as he sat there shaking hands with one after the other, his eyes twinkling in their deep sockets, and meeting with kindly glance the fresh young boy faces around him. In a moment more this was all forgotten, for we had reached the street, and were



rioting about in the snow as only boys let out from school for a week's vacation can do. How we did assail policemen and wagon-drivers and pretty girls, to be sure! These last were on their way home from school, too, and many were the laughing glances and shy smiles that were flung us in return for our harmless pats of snow.

Full of the merriment of the day, although not yet aware that it was really Christmas Eve, I made my way up to Boylston Market, which was completely transfigured from a rather jail-like and dreary receptacle for unpleasantly red shoulders of mutton and beef, to a wonderland of evergreen and holly; it had not yet given place to a great dry-goods emporium. Here I saw my former teachers—God bless them, every one!—approach in a group, very much like boys themselves, for the time, and select various wreaths and bunches of green for home. I touched my "B. L. S." cap respectfully as they passed, but a flurry of snow came between and they did not see me. I stretched out my hand to them, but they were gone. Again the aching sense of loss, the dread of finding that I was in the midst of unrealities came over me, and I shivered from head to foot. Pulling my cap low over my ears, I hurried back to Bedford Street. Alas! my worst fears were realized. The old schoolhouse was gone. Strange faces stared at me through the darkening storm. I leaned against the black iron fence, which still remained, and hid my face in my hands. As I did so, the wind moaned drearily overhead, and I heard the

snow and sleet drifting against—what? My own window-panes!

Yes, the dream was truth, and the truth was a dream. I shivered again, in my easy chair, felt of my beard, stretched myself and rose stiffly to my feet. The fire had burned low, had fallen in entirely between the andirons, and the room was growing more chilly. I took some good birch sticks from the wood-box, encouraged them with a handful of dry cones, and, as they threw out their cheerful warmth, I became more and more content to remain a man, and leave my boyish days tied up, like old letters, in an out-of-the-way corner where I could take them out and live them over again at will.





V

THE CRACKED BELL

THERE was no doubt whatever of its melancholy condition. Cracked it was, and cracked it had been for the last two years. Just how the crack came there, nobody knew. It was, indeed, a tiny flaw, long ago covered by green rust, and apparently as harmless as the veriest thread or a wisp of straw, lodging for a moment on the old bell's brazen sides. But when the clapper began to swing, and gave one timid touch to the smooth inner surface of its small cell, the flaw made itself known, and as the strokes grew louder and angrier, the dissonance so clattered and battered against the ears of the parish, that after two years' patient endurance of this infliction (which they considered a direct discipline, to humble their pride over a new coat of white paint on the little church), one small, black-bonneted sister rose in prayer-meeting and begged that the bell be left quiet, or at least muffled for one day, as it disturbed her daughter, whom all the village knew to be suffering from nervous prostration.





Emboldened by this declaration of war, a deacon declared that it was an insult to religion and its Founder, to ring such a bell. It was the laughing-stock of the village, he added, and its flat discords were but a signal for derision on the part of every scoffer and backslider in the parish.

Other evidence of convincing character was given by various members of the congregation; the bell was tried, convicted and sentenced; and more than one face showed its relief as good old Dr. Manson, the pastor, instructed the sexton publicly to omit the customary call to services on the following Sabbath.

"I hope," he further said, looking around gravely on his people, "that you will all make more than usual effort to be in your pews promptly at half-past ten."

For a time the members of the First Congregational Society of North Penfield were noticeably and commendably prompt in their attendance upon all services. They were so afraid that they should be late that they arrived at the meeting-house a good while before the opening hymn. Dr. Manson was gratified, the village wits were put down, and the old bell hung peacefully in the belfry over the attentive worshipers, as silent as they. Snow and rain painted its surface with vivid tints, and the swallows learned that they could perch upon it without danger of its being jerked away from their slender feet.

There was no other meeting-house in the town, and as the nearest railroad was miles away, the sound of a clear-toned bell floating down from the

summer sky, or sending its sweet echoes vibrating through a wintry twilight in an oft-repeated mellow call to prayers, was almost forgotten.

Gradually the congregation fell into the habit of dropping in of a Sunday morning while the choir were singing the voluntary, or remaining in the vestibule where, behind the closed doors, they had a bit of gossip while they waited for the rustle within which announced the completion of the pastor's long opening prayer. It became a rare occurrence for all to be actually settled in their pews when the text was given out. The same tardiness was noticeable in the Friday evening meetings; and, odd to say, a certain spirit of indolence seemed to creep over the services themselves.



Whereas in former days the farmers and their wives were wont to come bustling briskly into the vestry while the bell was ringing, and the cheerful hum of voices arose in the informal handshaking "before meeting," soon quieting and then blending joyously in the stirring strains of "How Firm a Foundation," or "Onward, Christian Soldiers," followed by one brief, earnest prayer or exhortation after another, in quick succession, in these later days it was quite different. It was difficult to carry the first hymn through, as there were rarely enough good singers present to sustain the air. Now it was the pianist who was late, now the broad-shouldered mill-owner, whose rich bass was indeed a "firm foundation" for all timid sopranos and altos; now the young man who could sing any part with per-

fect confidence, and often did wander over all four in the course of a single verse, lending a helping hand, so to speak, wherever it was needed.

The halting and dispirited hymn made the members self-distrustful and melancholy at the outset. There were long pauses during which all the sluggish or tired-out brothers and sisters nodded in the heated room, and the sensitive and nervous clutched shawl fringes and coat buttons in agonized fidgets. The meetings became so dull and heavy that slight excuses were sufficient to detain easy-going members at home, especially the young people. It was a rare sight now to see bright eyes and rosy cheeks in the room. The members discussed the dismal state of affairs, which was only too plain, and laid the blame on the poor old minister.

"His sermons have n't the power they had once, Brother Stimpson," remarked Deacon Fairweather, shaking his head sadly, as they trudged home from afternoon service one hot Sunday in August. "There 's somethin' wantin'. I do n't jestly know what."

"He ain't pussonal enough. You want to be pussonal to do any good in a parish. There 's Squire Radbourne, now. Everybody knows he sets up Sunday evenin's and works on his law papers. I say there ought to be a reg'lar downright discourse on Sabbath breakin'."

"Thet 's so, thet 's so," assented the deacon. "And Brother Langworth has n't been nigh evenin' meetin' for mor 'n six weeks."





From one faulty member to another they wandered, forgetting, as they jogged along the familiar path side by side, the banks of goldenrod beside them, the blue sky and fleecy clouds above, the blue hills in the distance, and all the glory and brightness of the blessed summer day.

The next morning, North Penfield experienced a shock. The white-haired pastor, overcome by extra labor, increasing cares, the feebleness of age, or a combination of all these causes, had sunk down upon his bed helplessly, on his return from the little white meeting-house the afternoon before, never to rise again until he should leave behind him the weary earth-garments that now but hindered his slow and painful steps.

The townspeople were greatly concerned, for the old man was dearly loved by young and old. Those who of late had criticised now remembered Dr. Manson's palmy days, when teams came driving in from Penfield Center, "The Hollow," and two or three other adjoining settlements, to listen to the impassioned discourses of the young clergyman.

A meeting of the committee was called at once, to consider the affairs of the bereft church—for bereft they felt it to be—and take steps for an immediate supply during the vacancy of the pulpit. Two months later Dr. Manson passed peacefully away, and there was one more mound in the little churchyard.

The snows of early December already lay deep on road and field before the North Penfield Parish,



in a regularly-called and organized meeting, was given to understand that a new minister was settled. Half a dozen candidates had preached to the people but only one had met with favor.

Harold Olsen was a Norwegian by parentage, though born in America. Tall and straight as the pines of the Norseland, with clear, flashing blue eyes and honest, winning smile, the congregation began to love him before he was half through his first sermon. His sweet-faced little wife made friends with a dozen people between services; by nightfall the question was practically settled, and so was the Rev. Harold Olsen, "the new minister," as he was called for years afterward.

At the beginning of the second week in December, Harold ascended the pulpit stairs of the North Penfield meeting-house, feeling very humble and very thankful in the face of his new duties. He loved his work, his people, his wife and his God; and here he was, with them all four at once.

Sleigh-bells jingled merrily outside the door; one family after another came trooping in, muffled to the ears, and moved demurely up the central or side aisles to their high-backed pews.

The sunlight found its way in under the old-fashioned fan-shaped blinds at the tops of the high windows, and rested upon gray hair and brown, on figures bowed with grief and age, on restless, eager children, on the pulpit itself, and finally upon the golden-edged leaves of the old Bible.

Still the people came in. A hymn was given out

and sung. While Harold was lifting his soul to heaven on the wings of his prayer, he could not help hearing the noise of heavy boots in the meeting-house entry, stamping off the snow. His fervent "Amen" was the signal for a draft of cold air from the doors, followed by a dozen late comers.

After the sermon, which was so simple and straightforward that it went directly to the hearts of the people, he hastened to confer with his deacons.

"The bell did n't ring this morning, Brother Fairweather. What was the matter?" he asked, after a warm hand-grasp all round.

"Why, the fact is, sir, there ain't no bell."

"That is, none to speak of," put in Deacon Stimpson apologetically. "There 's a bell up there, but it got so cracked an' out o' tune that nobody could stan' it, sick or well."



The Rev. Harold Olsen's eyes twinkled. "How long have you gone without this unfortunate bell?"

"Oh! a matter o' two or three years, I guess."

"Weddings, funerals, and all?"

"Well, yes," reluctantly, "I b'lieve so. I did feel bad when we follered the minister to his grave without any tollin'—he was master fond o' hearing that bell, fust along—but there, it could n't be helped! Public opinion was against that 'ere particular bell, and we jes' got laughed at, ringin' it. So we stopped, and here we be, without it."

Mr. Olsen's blue eyes sparkled again as he caught his little wife's glance, half amused, half pained. He changed the subject, and went among his pa-

rishioners, inquiring kindly for the absent ones, and making new friends.

At a quarter before three (the hour for afternoon service) he entered the meeting-house again. The sexton was asleep in one of the pews. He was roused by a summons so startling that a repetition was necessary before he could comprehend its import.

"R-ring the bell!" he gasped incredulously. "W-why, sir, it has n't been rung for"—

"Never mind, Mr. Bedlow," interrupted Harold, with his pleasant smile. "Let 's try it to-day, just for a change."

Harold had attended one or two prayer-meetings, as well as Sunday services, and—had an idea.

On reaching the entry, the sexton shivered in the cold air, and pointed helplessly to a hole in the ceiling, through which the bell rope was intended to play.

"I put it up inside out of the way, so 's the boys could n't get it," he chattered. "D-do n't you think, sir, we 'd better wait till"—

But it was no use to talk to empty air. The new minister had gone, and presently returned with a long heavy bench, which he handled as easily as if it were a lady's work-basket.

"Just steady it a bit," he asked; and Mr. Bedlow, with conscientious misgivings as to the propriety of his assisting at a gymnastic performance on Sunday, did as he was bid.





Up went the minister like a cat; and presently down came the knotted end of the rope. "Now, let 's have a good, hearty pull, Mr. Bedlow."

The sexton grasped the rope and pulled. There was one frightened, discordant outcry from the astonished bell; and there stood poor Mr. Bedlow with about three yards of detached rope in his hands. It had broken just above the point where it passed through the flooring over his head.

"Now, sir," expostulated the sexton.

"Here, Dick!" called Mr. Olsen, to a bright-faced little fellow who had put his head in at the door and was regarding these unwonted proceedings with round-eyed astonishment; "won't you run over to my house and ask my wife for that long piece of clothes-line that hangs up in the kitchen closet?"

Dick was gone like a flash, his curiosity excited to the highest pitch.

"What does he want it for?" asked pretty Olga Olsen, hurrying to produce the required article.

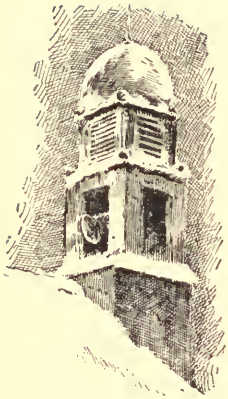
"Do n't know," panted Dick. "He 's got Mr. Bedlow—in the entry—an' he sent for a rope, double quick!"

With which bewildering statement he tore out of the house and back to the church.

Five minutes later the population of North Penfield were astounded by hearing a long-silent, but only too familiar voice.

"It 's that old cracked bell!" exclaimed half a hundred voices at once, in as many families. "Do let 's go to meetin' an' see what 's the matter."





The afternoon's congregation was, in fact, even larger than the morning's. Harold noted it with quiet satisfaction, and gave out as his text the first verse of the sixty-sixth Psalm.

At the close of his brief sermon he paused a moment, then referred to the subject in all their thoughts, speaking in no flippant or jesting tone, but in a manner that showed how sacredly important he considered the matter.

"I have been pained to notice," he said gravely, "the tardiness with which we begin our meetings. It is perfectly natural that we should be late, when there is no general call, such as we have been accustomed to hear from childhood. I do not blame anybody in the least. I do believe that we have all grown into a certain sluggishness, both physical and spiritual, in our assembling together, as a direct consequence of the omission of those tones which to us and our fathers have always spoken but one blessed word—'*Come!*' I believe," he continued, looking about over the kindly faces before him, "I believe you agree with me that something should be done. Do n't think me too hasty or presuming in my new pastorate, if I add that it seems to me vitally important to take action at once. Our bell is not musical, it is true, but its tones, cracked and unmelodious as they are, will serve to remind us of our church home, its duties and its pleasures. On Tuesday evening we will hold a special meeting in this house to consider the question of purchasing a new bell, to take the place of the old. The

Prudential Committee, and all who are interested in the subject are urged to be present. Let us pray."

It was a wonderful "season," that Tuesday evening conference. The cracked bell did its quavering best for a full twenty minutes before the hour appointed, to call the people together; and no appeal could have been more irresistible.

Two-thirds of the sum required was raised that night. For ten days more the old bell rang on every possible occasion, until it became an accusing voice of conscience to the parish. Prayer-meetings once more began sharp on the hour, and proceeded with old-time vigor. The interest spread until a real revival was in progress before the North Penfield Society were fairly aware of the change. Still the "bell fund" lacked fifty dollars of completion.



On the evening of the twentieth of December, in the midst of a furious storm, a knock was heard at the parsonage, and lo, at the hastily opened door stood Squire Radbourne, powdered with snowflakes, and beaming like a veritable Santa Claus.

"I could n't feel easy," he announced, after he had been relieved of coat and furs, and seated before the blazing fire, "to have next Sunday go by without a new bell on the meeting-house. We must have some good hearty ringing on that morning, sure; it 's the twenty-fifth, you know. So here 's a little Christmas present to the parish—or the Lord, either way you want to put it."

The crisp fifty-dollar note he laid down before the delighted couple was all that was needed.

Harold made a quick calculation—he had already selected a bell at a foundry a hundred miles away—and sitting down at his desk wrote rapidly.

"I 'll mail your letter," said the squire. "It 's right on my way—or near enough. Let 's get it off to-night, to save time."

And away he trudged again, through the deepening drifts and the blur of the white storm.

On Saturday evening, after all the village people were supposed to be abed and asleep, two dark figures might have been seen moving to and fro in the old meeting-house, with a lantern. After some irregular movements in the entry, the light appeared in the belfry, and a little later, one queer, flat, brassy note, uncommonly like the voice of the cracked bell, rang out on the night air. Then there was absolute silence; and before long the meeting-house was locked up and left to itself again on Christmas Eve—alone, with the wonder-secret of a new song in its faithful heart, waiting to break forth in praise of God at dawn of day.

How the people started that fair Christmas morning, as the sweet, silvery notes fell on their ears! They hastened to the church; they pointed to the belfry where the bell swung to and fro in a joyous call of "*Come! Come! Come! Come!*"

They listened in rapt silence, and some could not restrain their sobs, while others with grateful tears in their eyes looked upon the old, rusty, cracked bell



that rested, silent, on the church floor; and as they looked, and even passed their hands lovingly over its worn sides, they thanked God for its faithful service and the good work it had wrought—and for the glad hopes that filled that blessed Christmas Day.





VI

CHRISTMAS FOLK-LORE

"At Christmas play, and make good cheer,
For Christmas comes but once a year."

So said good Thomas Tusser, many generations ago, and his words have echoed in the hearts of old and young, rich and poor, from his day up to this blessed Year of Our Lord, 1898. Let us thank God and take courage when we remember that the Power of Evil has no one Book to set off against the Bible, and no one day to match Christmas. It is one of the gladdest and fairest signs of the times that this merry holiday, so full of good-will to men, is drawing closer and closer to the heart of the nation. For this one season in the year, everybody is thinking of everybody else, instead of himself, and we join the wise men in their march across the desert, following the Star, until we, too, find ourselves upon our knees before the manger in which the young Child was.

It is among the nations of the North, the Germans,



the Swedes, the Norwegians and the English, that the finest and deepest significance has been attached to this holy day. Among the German peasantry, especially, are found numerous home legends, beliefs and superstitions which even the nineteenth century, with its growth of science and liberal thought, has been unable to reach. Many of these customs and beliefs have never been told in any language save that of the country in which they took their rise ; the folk-lore of the Teutonic nations is still a rich storehouse of treasures for the antiquarian, and for those who love Christmas for its own truest meaning, the day when Christ was born.

The concurrence of the winter solstice with Christmas gave rise in the earliest times to many of the tales of Norse mythology. In the summer the good gods, Woden and Freia, with thousands of friendly elves, brought flowers and fruits to cheer the heart of man. But as winter came on, and the days grew ever shorter and the dark nights longer, the evil spirits held the good gods, enchanted by their power, far up among the snowy mountains, and prevented the passage of pious souls to their rest. Then came storms, and awful things upon the earth. A many-headed monster roamed the village, seizing the children, throwing them into a sack, and devouring them at its leisure. Giants descended from the hills and robbed the lonely traveler. In Denmark a frightful creature covered with a hairy robe was wont to creep into houses after dark to steal the products of the harvest, and, if it found nothing,

would utter maledictions and threats, showing at the same time from beneath its covering a black face and mouth full of fire.

As Christmas time draws near, and the sun turns northward once more, Woden issues forth upon a white horse, and, followed by howling packs of dogs, drives the evil spirits to their hiding-places in the mountains. Sometimes in his wild hunt he sweeps through a house and leaves behind him a dog, who crouches upon the hearth and stays there for one year, whining, moaning, feeding on ashes, and snapping at all who approach. On the next Christmas, Woden comes for him again, and the dog leaps through the chimney to rejoin the howling pack in the tree-tops.

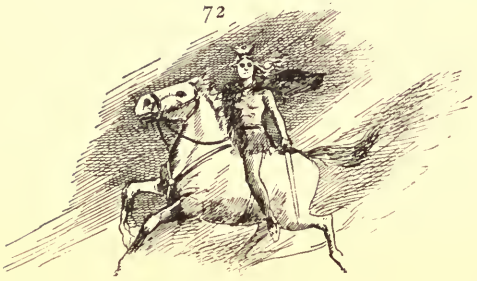
To this day the Germans associate the coming of Christ with the return of the sun, and the approach of spring. One of their poets sings:

"The sun in winter is God in grief,
Is Christ who cometh to bring relief.
Beneath its blessed radiance, man
Forgets that his life is but a span.

"The sun in winter is Christmastide,
Which scatters its blessings far and wide,
And sheds, through faith, o'er time's dark sea,
The morning rays of eternity."

"That Christmas is a holiday of light and victory," begins Cassel, in his account of the day,[1] "every

[1] *Weihnachten: Ursprunge, Brauche und Aberglauben.*—Cassel, Leipzig.



one who has lived within its influence knows full well. This victory is more sure than the return of spring, to which we look forward in December with such cheerful hope. The Spirit of Truth dwells upon loftier heights than does the creature, and its brightness chases away the shadows of many a gloomy hour, darker than the longest night of midwinter."



And now the wonderful hour draws nigh. It is Christmas Eve. All nature is hushed. As the shepherds once sat around their fire upon the plains of Bethlehem, discussing, perchance, the strange portents attending the birth of the son of Zacharias, so to-night the peasants in their huts along the shores of the Baltic, or in the shadows of the Black Forest, sit before the Yule log, and talk of the birth of the Son of man. Suddenly the village bells toll for midnight. The sun appears upon the horizon and leaps three times for joy; the birds throughout the forest break forth into singing; every fir-tree blossoms into fairest flower and fruitage, and is clothed once more in soft leaves, in place of the sharp, spear-pointed needles into which they were condemned to shrink when a fir-tree was used for the Saviour's cross. All the good people of the village are praying; and hark! the cattle, upon their knees in the stable, are talking together in low tones. "*A child is bo-or-rn!*" lows the cow. "*True-e-e,*" returns the ass. "*Where, where, where?*" calls the shrill voice of the cock—and the lambs answer, "*In Be-e-t-t-'lem!*" The horses alone have nothing to say, and



are upright on their feet; for when Christ was born, so the story goes, the horses who happened to be near the manger stamped and were rude, while the great, sweet-breathed oxen gazed upon the wee Baby with their mild eyes, and, with the asses and lambs, knelt in worship. For this hardness of heart horses are condemned to never have their fill of grass, and to this day they feed eagerly in the fields, but are never satisfied.

While these strange things are happening in the stables of the little German village, the gnomes are busy in the mountains, throwing out gold and precious treasures of the earth where men shall find them the coming year.

When Christmas morning dawns, which in the northern countries is not before nine or ten in the forenoon, the first loaves that come smoking from the housewife's oven are given to the cattle. In Sweden it is the custom to tie a sheaf of grain to a pole and set it up where the birds may alight and take part in the joy and good cheer of the day. Before long the village beggars are knocking at the door, and the humblest peasant, remembering that it is the day on which God gave his only-begotten Son to the world, dispenses with a free hand his gifts to all that come.

Evergreen, and, in particular, the fir-tree, has been from the earliest times associated with Christmas, and countless tales and legends are perfumed with its spicy odors. Many are the German songs that are full of its praises.

"O northern fir, O northern fir,
In thee my heart delighteth,
How oft thy boughs at Christmastide
Have shed their blessings far and wide;—
In thee my heart delighteth."

Hans Christian Andersen, whose happiest hours were those spent in writing pure and sweet fairy-tales for children, has told the story of the fir-tree in his own gentle way. Here is one more child-song, freely translated from Cassel's notes:



Within the wood a fir-tree stands,
So stately to be seen;
In summer, spring and winter, too,
Its cloak is ever green.

Its tiny needles, fine and sharp—
Some pointing up, some down—
The thistle-finch doth take, to sew
Her pretty yellow gown.

Through snow and ice the Christ-child sends
The good old Santa Klaus,
Who straightway hews the fir-tree down
And bears it to the house.

With loving hand, the Christ-child hangs
The nuts and apples there;
A taper small upon each twig,
And cakes and dainties rare.

Then comes the blessed Christmas night,
The bell is rung—and lo!
There stands the fir-tree, green and still,
Its branches all aglow.

Thou fir-tree in the forest dark,
Soon shalt thou hence be borne.
Rejoice! for then thy branches, too,
The Christ-child shall adorn.



In Scandinavia two fir boughs are nailed cross-wise before the door on Christmas day. Children go about the village, knocking at the windows with fir twigs, and receiving gifts of sugar plums. The Alsatian peasantry relate that the apostle to the people on the Rhine and Moselle was the son of the widow of Nain. Long after his miraculous resurrection he was sent westward by Saint Peter. One day he came to the steep banks of the Rhine, and, stopping to rest, fell asleep from weariness, in the shade of a fir-tree. On awaking, he found that his pilgrim's staff had grown into the trunk of the fir, and thus plainly indicated that he had reached the appointed end of his journey.

In England, the same veneration seems to have been bestowed, time out of mind, upon the holly. Its glossy, pointed leaves symbolize the crown of thorns, and the berries the crimson blood-drops that gathered upon the Saviour's brow. Like the fir, it is ever green and full of life—as the love of Christ to mankind. Indeed this almost instinctive association of green boughs and all bright, growing things with the joy and beauty of religious life, extends throughout written history. The Israelites in the desert were taught (if they had not already adopted a custom which was thus merely confirmed and sanctified) to "take the boughs of goodly trees,



branches of palm trees, and the boughs of thick trees, and willows of the brook; and ye shall rejoice before the Lord your God seven days " (Leviticus 23 : 40).

So, too, the wreaths of green leaves attributed to the Greek and Roman deities, and awarded to those who seemed most godlike, in peace or war. When Christ entered Jerusalem, the fittest expressions of the joy, the thanksgiving and the reverent worship of the multitude were the palm branches, strewn in the path of him who was victorious over Evil, and who—not conquered death, but showed him to be only the angel of Life, with the shadowy side of his face turned towards us, as he comes between us and the Everlasting Light.

In the early days of England the Druids were accustomed to go forth at Christmas and gather the sacred mistletoe ; while even the poor and humbler folk brought evergreen and hung it up in their cottages, that the gentle spirits of the forest might dwell there in safety till the sun should shine again. In these modern days it has become the fashion to use evergreens more and more generously. The two largest of the Boston markets are surrounded, for a week preceding Christmas day, with a spicy forest of spruce and fir-trees, while the sidewalks are half hidden beneath great fragrant heaps of " princess pine " and " creeping Jenny," in the form of wreaths, crosses and trimming. Holly, too, is used in larger quantities every year, and altogether the times seem



to be returning, which dear old Sir Walter longed for when he sung:



Heap on more wood !—the wind is chill
But let it whistle as it will,
We 'll keep our Christmas merry still.
Each age has deemed the new-born year
The fittest time for festal cheer.
And well our Christian sires of old
Loved when the year its course had rolled,
And brought blithe Christmas back again,
With all its hospitable train.
Domestic and religious rite
Gave honor to the holy night ;
On Christmas eve the bells were rung ;
On Christmas eve the mass was sung ;
That only night in all the year,
Saw the stoled priest the chalice rear.

The damsel donned her kirtle sheen ;
The hall was dressed with holly green ;
Forth to the wood did merry men go,
To gather in the mistletoe.
Then opened wide the baron's hall
To vassal, tenant, serf, and all ;
Power laid his rod of rule aside,
And ceremony doffed his pride ;
All hailed with uncontrolled delight
And general voice the happy night
That to the cottage, as the crown,
Brought tidings of salvation down.

England was merry England, when
Old Christmas brought his sports again.
'T was Christmas broached the mightiest ale ;
'T was Christmas told the merriest tale ;
A Christmas gambol oft could cheer
The poor man's heart through half the year.

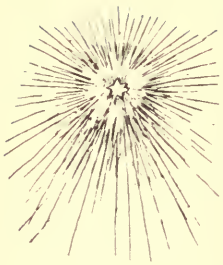


Christmas Folk-Lore

Of all the supernatural visitors who roused old Scrooge from his slumbers in Dickens' immortal "Carol," by far the most interesting was the Ghost of Christmas Present. The Past is a memory; the Future a dream; the Present is ours. With its ghost—or its spirit, to free ourselves from uncanny associations with the name—we are intimately associated: it is the key-note, or rather the theme, which determines the harmony or discord of the year.

What, then, is the spirit of our own Christmas Present? what the underlying motive and thought, the impulse that turns our population out of their comfortable homes in the snowy streets during the most inclement month of our New England year, and then as universally gathers each family circle within doors on that one supreme Day of days? which decks counter, wall, window, and altar with evergreen, type of Eternal Life; which loosens the purse-strings of rich and poor; which brings the name of Christ tenderly to the lips of young and old? With all this we have much to do. Here it is, the spirit of Christmas, analyzable or not, for good or for evil.

There is much outcry nowadays against the extravagant mysticism which pervades the observance of the day. Christmas cards have run wild with grotesque fancies. Christmas games, legends, stories, plays,—even the columns of the daily press are full of them. At this season, the compositor may keep standing the words "Christmas," "Bethlehem," "Christ," so often are they called into service.



There is the mysticism, the revival of the ancient myth and folk-belief; and there is the rush of "the trade" for the pecuniary advantages of the public tender-heartedness. One man gazes at the Star until he stumbles in the highway: his neighbor stands at the gates of Bethlehem on Christmas morning and takes toll. These are the extremes, never more marked, more obtrusive, than in this year of our Lord 1898.

But between the two, hurrying over the fields toward the city by the light of the Star, and thronging through the gates toward the little manger throne, are the vast numbers of honest, earnest, sincere men and women who find at Christmastide their perplexed lives made clear, their hopes brightened, their burdens lightened, their strength renewed for the twelvemonth to come.

To the mysticism, the love for glorified myth and legend, that characterizes the Spirit of Christmas Present, they find an answering chord in their own hearts, which will not be satisfied with shallow interpretations of the day; which demands something deeper, and cannot rest content with the broken clause, "On earth peace, good will toward men," but must echo the wonderful song that rang out over the dark hill-slopes of Judæa, "Glory to God in the highest."

As we gather about the cradle of every wee human child, born by such wondrous miracle, so on each Christmas Eve the world gathers at the rude manger where its Baby is laid, gazing into the gentle, radiant



face, and whispering, "There is born this day a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord!"

"Mysticism,"—life is clothed in mystery! The birth of the poorest, meanest child, in the shabbiest attic of your street of ill repute, is a mystery far too sacred for man to divine. How shall we smile at those who find in Christmas the consummate Mystery, the holiest miracle that the weary, wondering earth has known?

The holiest, the deepest, and yet the simplest! For Christmas Day is pre-eminently a day for entering the kingdom as a child. The door of the stable is low; and we must stoop as we enter hand in hand with little folk,—so sweet, so humble, so dear to everyday, plain home-living is this Christian season of merrymaking.

The august features of the wise astrologers of the East relax, as they turn from the Star to the face of the Child. The tax-gatherer forgets his calling, and at last joins the throng of Christmas joy-makers and joy-receivers, who find kindly impersonation in "Santa Claus."

Let the card-dealers, then, and the writers of pretty fancies—the students of folk-lore, the devotees of mystic rite—have their way; let the tradesman prosper in the time of gift-giving; and every toiler in the wide business field reap his golden harvest or glean his few sheaves, as he may. We will not cast out from the Spirit of Christmas Present its solemnity, its prosperity, its simple and innocent gayety. There is no danger at present that Christ-

mas shall be too much observed in America: there is only the danger that its good cheer and deeper thought, its impulse of benevolence and good will toward men, shall be confined to a few days or weeks of the year.

Extremes of enthusiasm will ripen into earnest living. It is narrowness and coldness, the mere humanitarian spirit of good morals, the sneer at Christmas sentiment, that are to be dreaded. It is the spirit of "Christmas all the year round" that is to be prayed for.





VII

MRS. BROWNLOW'S CHRISTMAS PARTY

It was fine Christmas weather. Several light snow-storms in the early part of December had left the earth fair and white, and the sparkling, cold days that followed were enough to make the most crabbed and morose of mankind cheerful, as with a foretaste of the joyous season at hand. Down town the sidewalks were crowded with mothers and sisters, buying gifts for their sons, brothers, and husbands, who found it impossible to get anywhere by taking the ordinary course of foot-travel, and were obliged to stalk along the snowy streets beside the curbstone, in a sober but not ill-humored row.

Among those who were looking forward to the holidays with keen anticipations of pleasure, were Mr. and Mrs. Brownlow, of Elm Street, Boston. They had quietly talked the matter over together, and decided that, as there were three children in the family (not counting themselves, as they might well have done), it would be a delightful and not



too expensive luxury to give a little Christmas party.

"You see, John," said Mrs. Brownlow, "we 've been asked, ourselves, to half a dozen candy-pulls and parties since we 've lived here, and it seems nothin' but fair that we should do it once ourselves."

"That 's so, Clarissy," replied her husband slowly; "but then—there 's so many of us, and my salary 's —well, it would cost considerable, little woman, would n't it?"

"I 'll tell you what!" she exclaimed. "We need n't have a regular grown-up party, but just one for children. We can get a small tree, and a bit of a present for each of the boys and girls, with ice-cream and cake, and let it go at that. The whole thing sha'n't cost ten dollars."

"Good!" said Mr. Brownlow heartily. "I knew you 'd get some way out of it. Let 's tell Bob and Sue and Polly, so they can have the fun of looking forward to it."

So it was settled and all hands entered into the plan with such a degree of earnestness that one would have thought these people were going to have some grand gift themselves, instead of giving to others, and pinching for a month afterwards, in their own comforts, as they knew they would have to do.

The first real difficulty they met was in deciding whom to invite. John was for asking only the children of their immediate neighbors; but Mrs. Brown-

low said it would be a kindness, as well as polite, to include those who were better off than themselves.

"I allus think, John," she explained, laying her hand on his shoulder, "that it 's just 's much despisin' to look down on your rich neighbors—as if all they 'd got was money—as on your poor ones. Let 's ask 'em all: Deacon Holsum's, the Brights, and the Nortons." The Brights were Mr. Brownlow's employers.



"Anybody else?" queried her husband, with his funny twinkle. "P'raps you 'd like to have me ask the governor's family, or Jordan & Marsh!"

"Now, John, do n't you be saucy," she laughed, relieved at having carried her point. "Let 's put our heads together, and see who to set down. Susie will write the notes in her nice hand, and Bob can deliver them, to save postage."

"Well, you 've said three," counted Mr. Brownlow on his fingers. "Then there 's Mrs. Sampson's little girl, and the four Williamses, and"—he enumerated one family after another, till nearly thirty names were on the list.

Once Susie broke in, "O Pa, *do n't* invite that Mary Spenfield; she 's awfully stuck-up and cross!"

"Good!" said her father again. "This will be just the thing for her. Let her be coffee and you be sugar, and see how much you can sweeten her that evening."

In the few days that intervened before the twenty-fifth, the whole family were busy enough, Mrs. Brownlow shopping, Susie writing the notes,



and the others helping wherever they got a chance. Every evening they spread out upon the sitting-room floor such presents as had been bought during the day. These were not costly, but they were chosen lovingly, and seemed very nice indeed to Mr. Brownlow and the children, who united in praising the discriminating taste of Mrs. B., as with justifiable pride she sat in the center of the room, bringing forth her purchases from the depths of a capacious carpetbag.

The grand final expenditure was left until the day before Christmas. Mr. Brownlow got off from his work early, with his month's salary in his pocket, and a few kind words from his employers tucked away even more securely in his warm heart. He had taken special pains to include their children for his party, and he was quietly enjoying the thought of making them happy on the morrow.

By a preconcerted plan he met Mrs. Brownlow under the great golden eagle at the corner of Summer and Washington streets; and, having thus joined forces, the two proceeded in company toward a certain wholesale toy-shop where Mr. Brownlow was acquainted, and where they expected to secure such small articles as they desired, at dozen rates.

And now Mr. Brownlow realized what must have been his wife's exertions during the last fortnight. For having gallantly relieved her of her carpetbag, and offered his unoccupied arm for her support, he was constantly engaged in a struggle to maintain

his hold upon either one or the other of his charges, and rescuing them with extreme difficulty from the crowd. At one time he was simultaneously attacked at both vulnerable points, a very stout woman persisting in thrusting herself between him and his already bulging carpetbag, on the one hand, and an equally persistent old gentleman engaged in separating Mrs. Brownlow from him, on the other. With flushed but determined face he held on to both with all his might, when a sudden stampede, to avoid a passing team, brought such a violent pressure upon him that he found both Clarissa and bag dragged from him, while he himself was borne at least a rod away before he could stem the tide. Fortunately, the stout woman immediately fell over the bag, and Mr. Brownlow, having by this means identified the spot where it lay, hewed his way, figuratively speaking, to his wife and bore her off triumphantly. At last, to the relief of both, they reached the entrance of the toy-dealer's huge store. Mr. Brownlow at once hunted up his friend, and all three set about a tour of the premises.



It was beyond doubt a wonderful place. A little retail shop, in the Christmas holidays, is of itself a marvel; but this immense establishment, at the back doors of which stood wagons constantly receiving cases on cases of goods directed to all parts of the country, was quite another thing. Such long passageways there were, walled in from floor to ceiling with boxes of picture-blocks, labeled in German; such mysterious, gloomy alcoves, by the sides of

which lurked innumerable wild animals with glaring eyes and rigid tails; such fleets of Noah's arks, wherein were bestowed the patriarch's whole family (in tight-fitting garments of yellow and red) and specimens of all creation, so promiscuously packed together that it must have been extremely depressing to all concerned; such a delicious smell of sawdust and paint and wax; in short such presentation of Toy in the abstract, and Toy in particular, and Toy overhead, and underfoot, and in the very air,—could never have existed outside of Cottlow & Co.'s, Manufacturers, Dealers, and Importers of Toys.

Mrs. Brownlow was fairly at her wits' end to choose. When she meekly inquired for tin soldiers, solid regiments of them sprang up, like Jason's armed men, at her bidding. At the suggestion of a doll, the world seemed suddenly and solely peopled with these little creatures, and winking, crying, walking and talking dolls crowded about the bewildered customers,—dolls with flaxen hair, and dolls with no hair at all; dolls of imposing proportions when viewed in front, but of no thickness to speak of, when held sideways; dolls as rigid as mummies, and dolls who exhibited an alarming tendency to double their arms and legs up backward. To add to the confusion, the air was filled with the noise of trumpets, drums, musical boxes and other instruments, which were being tested in various parts of the building, until poor Mrs. Brownlow declared she should go distracted. At length, however, she and her husband, with the assistance of their polite





friend, succeeded in selecting two or three dozen small gifts, and, when the last purchase was concluded, started for home.

After a walk of ten minutes, they reached Boylston Market, where they were at once beset by venders of evergreen and holly wreaths, crosses and stars of every description. Mr. Brownlow bought half a dozen of the cheaper sort of wreaths, which the owner kindly threaded upon his arm, as if they were a sort of huge, fragrant beads. Then he selected a tree, and, after a short consultation with Mrs. Brownlow, decided to carry it home himself, to save a quarter. A horse-car opportunely passing, they boarded it, Mrs. Brownlow and her bag being with some difficulty squeezed in through the rear door, and Mr. Brownlow taking his stand upon the front platform, from which the tree, which had been tightly tied up, projected like a bowsprit, until they reached home.



Great was the bustle at 17 Elm Street that night. Parcels were unwrapped; the whole house was pleasantly redolent of boiling molasses; and from the kitchen there came at the same time a scratchy and poppy sound, denoting the preparation of mounds of feathery corn. Bob and his father took upon themselves the uprearing of the tree. On being carried to the parlor it was found to be at least three feet too long, and Mr. Brownlow, in his shirt-sleeves, accomplished wonders with a saw, smearing himself in the process with pitch, from head to foot.



The tree seemed at first inclined to be sulky, perhaps at having been decapitated and curtailed; for it obstinately leaned backward, kicked over the soap-box in which it was set, bumped against Mr. Brownlow, tumbled forward, and in short, behaved itself like a tree which was determined to lie on its precious back all the next day, or perish in the attempt. At length, just as they were beginning to despair of ever getting it firm and straight, it gave a little quiver of its limbs, yielded gracefully to a final push by Bob, and stood upright, as fair and comely a Christmas tree as one would wish to see. Mr. Brownlow crept out backward from under the lower branches, (thereby throwing his hair into the wildest confusion and adding more pitch to himself), and regarded it with a sigh of content. Such presents as were to be disposed of in this way were now hung upon the branches; then strings of pop-corn, bits of wool, and glistening paper, a few red apples, and lastly the candles. When all was finished, which was not before midnight, the family withdrew to their beds, with weary limbs and brains, but with light-hearted anticipation of to-morrow.

"Do you s'pose Mrs. Bright will come with her children, John?" asked Mrs. Brownlow, as she turned out the gas.

"Should n't—wonder"—sleepily from the four-poster.

"Did Mr. Bright say anything about the invitation we sent, when he paid you off?"

Silence. More silence. Good Mr. Brownlow was asleep, and Clarissa soon followed him.

Meanwhile the snow, which had been falling fast during the early part of the evening, had ceased, leaving the earth as fair to look upon as the fleece-drifted sky above it. Slowly the heavy banks of cloud rolled away, disclosing star after star, until the moon itself looked down, and sent a soft "Merry Christmas" to mankind. At last came the dawn, with a glorious burst of sunlight and church-bells and glad voices, ushering in the gladdest and dearest day of all the year.



The Brownlows were early astir, full of the joyous spirit of the day. There was a clamor of Christmas greetings, and a delighted medley of shouts from the children over the few simple gifts that had been secretly laid aside for them. But the ruling thought in every heart was the party. It was to come off at five o'clock in the afternoon, when it would be just dark enough to light the candles on the tree.

In spite of all the hard work of the preceding days, there was not a moment to spare that forenoon. The house, as the head of the family facetiously remarked, was a perfect hive of B's.

As the appointed hour drew near, their nervousness increased. The children had been scrubbed from top to toe, and dressed in their very best clothes; Mrs. Brownlow wore a cap with lavender ribbons, which she had a misgiving were too gaudy for a person of her sedate years. Nor was the excitement confined to the interior of the house. The



tree was placed in the front parlor, close to the window, and by half-past four a dozen ragged children were gathered about the iron fence of the little front yard, gazing open-mouthed and open-eyed at the spectacular wonders within. At a quarter before five Mrs. Brownlow's heart beat hard every time she heard a strange footstep in their quiet street. It was a little odd that none of the guests had arrived; but then, it was fashionable to be late!

Ten minutes more passed. Still no arrivals. It was evident that each was planning not to be the first to get there, and that they would all descend on the house and assault the door-bell at once. Mrs. Brownlow repeatedly smoothed the wrinkles out of her tidy apron, and Mr. Brownlow began to perspire with responsibility.

Meanwhile the crowd outside, recognizing no rigid bonds of etiquette, rapidly increased in numbers. Mr. Brownlow, to pass the time and please the poor little homeless creatures, lighted two of the candles.

The response from the front-yard fence was immediate. A low murmur of delight ran along the line, and several dull-eyed babies were hoisted, in the arms of babies scarcely older than themselves, to behold the rare vision of candles in a tree, just illumining the further splendors glistening here and there among the branches.

The kind man's heart warmed towards them, and he lighted two more candles. The delight of the audience could now hardly be restrained, and the

babies, having been temporarily lowered by the aching little arms of their respective nurses, were shot up once more to view the redoubled grandeur.



The whole family had become so much interested in these small outcasts that they had not noticed the flight of time. Now some one glanced suddenly at the clock, and exclaimed, "It 's nearly half-past five!"

The Brownlows looked at one another blankly. Poor Mrs. Brownlow's smart ribbons drooped in conscious abasement, while mortification and pride struggled in their wearer's kindly face, over which, after a moment's silence, one large tear slowly rolled, and dropped off.

Mr. Brownlow gave himself a little shake and sat down, as was his wont upon critical occasions. As his absent gaze wandered about the room, so prettily decked for the guests who did n't come, it fell upon a little worn, gilt-edged volume on the table. At that sight, a new thought occurred to him. "Clarissy," he said softly, going over to his wife and putting his arm around her, "Clarissy, seein 's the well-off folks have n't accepted, do n't you think we 'd better invite some of the others in?" And he pointed significantly toward the window.

Mrs. Brownlow, despatching another tear after the first, nodded. She was not quite equal to words yet. Being a woman, the neglect of her little party cut her even more deeply than it did her husband.

Mr. Brownlow stepped to the front door. Nay more, he walked down the short flight of steps, took



one little girl by the hand, and said in his pleasant, fatherly way,

"Would n't you like to go in and look at the tree? Come, Puss" (to the waif at his side), "we 'll start first."

With these words he led the way back through the open door, and into the warm, lighted room. The children hung back a little, but seeing that no harm came to the first guest, soon flocked in, each trying to keep behind all the rest, but at the same time shouldering the babies up into view as before.

In the delightful confusion that followed, the good hosts forgot all about the miscarriage of their plans. They completely outdid themselves, in efforts to please their hastily acquired company. Bob spoke a piece, the girls sang duets. Mrs. Brownlow had held every individual baby in her motherly arms before half an hour was over. And as for Mr. Brownlow, it was simply marvelous to see him go among those children, giving them the presents, and initiating their owners into the mysterious impelling forces of monkeys with yellow legs and gymnastic tendencies ; filling the boys' pockets with pop-corn, blowing horns and tin whistles ; now assaulting the tree (it had been lighted throughout, and—bless it —how firm it stood now !) for fresh novelties, now diving into the kitchen and returning in an unspeakably cohesive state of breathlessness and molasses candy,—all the while laughing, talking, patting heads, joking, until the kindly Spirit of Christmas Present



would have wept and smiled at once, for the pleasure of the sight.

"And now, my young friends," said Mr. Brownlow, raising his voice, "we 'll have a little ice-cream in the back room. Ladies first, gentlemen afterward!" So saying, he gallantly stood on one side, with a sweep of his hand, to allow Mrs. Brownlow to precede him. But just as the words left his mouth there came a sharp ring at the door-bell.

"It 's a carriage!" gasped Mrs. Brownlow, flying to the front window, and backing precipitately. "Susie, go to that door an' see who 't is. Land sakes, *what* a mess this parlor 's in!" And she gazed with a true housekeeper's dismay at the littered carpet and dripping candles.

"Deacon Holsum and Mrs. Hartwell, Pa!" announced Susie, throwing open the parlor door.

The lady thus mentioned came forward with outstretched hand. Catching a glimpse of Mrs. Brownlow's embarrassed face she exclaimed quickly—

"Is n't this splendid! Father and I were just driving past, and we saw your tree through the window, and could n't resist dropping in upon you. You won't mind us, will you?"

"Mind—you!" repeated Mrs. Brownlow, in astonishment. "Why of course not—only you are so late—we did n't expect"—

Mrs. Hartwell looked puzzled.

"Pardon me,—I do n't think I quite understand"—

"The invitation was for five, you know, ma'am."

"But we received no invitation!"

Mr. Brownlow, who had greeted the deacon heartily and then listened with amazement to this conversation, now turned upon Bob, with a signally futile attempt at a withering glance.

Bob looked as puzzled as the rest, for a moment. Then his face fell, and he flushed to the roots of his hair.

"I—I—must have—forgot"—he stammered.

"Forgotten what?"

"The invitations—they 're in my desk now!"

Thus Bob, with utterly despairing tone and self-abasement.

Mrs. Hartwell's silvery little laugh rang out—it was as near moonlight playing on the upper keys of an organ as anything you can imagine—and grasped Mrs. Brownlow's hand.

"You poor dear!" she cried, kissing her hostess, who stood speechless, not knowing whether to laugh or cry, "so that 's why nobody came! But who has cluttered—who has been having such a good time here, then?"



Mr. Brownlow silently led the last two arrivals to the door of the next room, and pointed in. It was now the kind deacon's turn to be touched.

"'Into the highways'!" he murmured, as he looked upon the unwashed, hungry little circle about the table.

"I s'pose," said Mr. Brownlow doubtfully, "they 'd like to have you sit down with 'em, just 's if they were folks—if you did n't mind?"

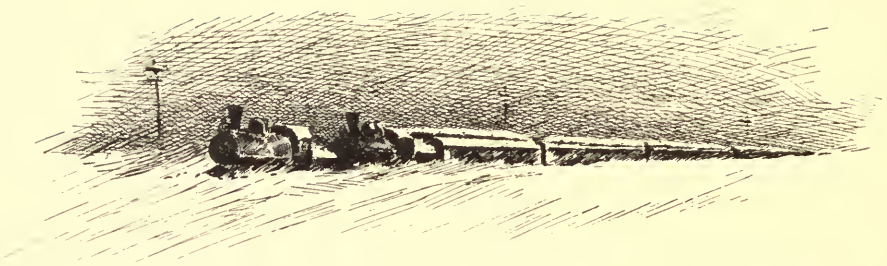
Mind ! I wish you could have seen the rich furs and overcoat come off and go down on the floor in a heap, before Polly could catch them !

When they were all seated, Mr. Brownlow looked over to the deacon, and he asked a blessing on the little ones gathered there. "Thy servants, the masters of this house, have suffered them to come unto thee," he said in his prayer. "Wilt thou take them into thine arms, O Father of lights, and bless them !"

A momentary hush followed, and then the fun began again. Sweetly and swiftly kind words flew back and forth across the table, each one carrying its own golden thread and weaving the hearts of poor and rich into the one fine fabric of brotherhood and humanity they were meant to form.

Outside, the snow began to fall once more, each crystaled flake whispering softly as it touched the earth that Christmas night, "*Peace—peace !*"





VIII

CHRISTMAS ON WHEELS

I

A RAILROAD station in a large city is hardly an inviting spot, at its best; but at the close of a cold, cheerless, blustering December day, when biting draughts of wind come scurrying in at every open door, filling the air with a gray compound of dust and fine snow; when passengers tramp up and down the long platform, waiting impatiently for their trains; when newsboys wander about with disconsolate, red faces, hands in pockets and bundles of unsold papers under their ragged and shivering arms; when, in general, humankind presents itself as altogether a frozen, forlorn, discouraged and hopeless race, condemned to be swept about on the nipping, dusty wind, like Francesca and her lover, at the rate of thirty miles an hour—then the station becomes positively unendurable.

So thought Bob Estabrook, as he paced to and

fro in the Boston and Albany depot, traveling-bag in hand, on just such a night as I have described. Beside him locomotives puffed and plunged and backed on the shining rails, as if they, too, felt compelled to trot up and down to keep themselves warm, and in even tolerably good humor.

"Just my luck!" growled Bob, with a misanthropic glare at a loud-voiced family who were passing; "Christmas coming, two jolly Brighton parties and an oratorio thrown up, and here am I, fired off to San Francisco. So much for being junior member of a law firm. Wonder what"—



Here the ruffled current of his meditations ran plump against a rock, and as suddenly diverged from their former course. The rock was no less than a young person who at that moment approached, with a gray-haired man, and inquired the way to the ticket-office.

Bob politely gave them the desired information, and watched them with growing interest as they followed his directions, and stood before the lighted window. The two silhouettes were decidedly out of the common. The voice, whose delicate tones still lingered pleasantly about Mr. Robert Estabrook's fastidious ears, was an individual voice, as distinguishable from any other he remembered as was the owner's bright face, the little fur collar beneath it, the daintily-gloved hands, and the pretty brown traveling suit.

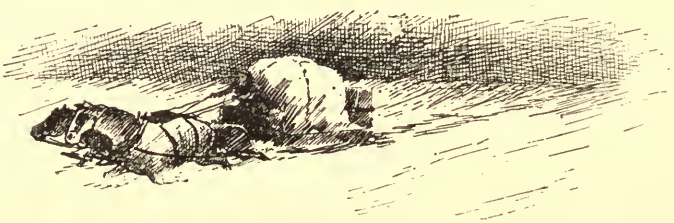
"Dignified old fellow!" mused Bob, irrelevantly as the couple moved toward the train-gates. "Prob-

ably her father. Perhaps—hallo, by George, they 're going on my car!"

With which breath of summer in his winter of discontent the young man proceeded to finish his cigar, consult his watch, and, as the last warning bell rang, step upon the platform of the already moving Pullman. It must be admitted that as he entered he gave an expectant glance down the aisle of the car; but the somber curtains hanging from ceiling to floor told no tales. Too sleepy to speculate, and too learned in the marvelous acoustic properties of a sleeping-car to engage the porter in conversation on the subject, he found his berth, arranged himself for the night with the nonchalance of an old traveler, and, laying his head upon his vibrating atom of a pillow, was soon plunged into a dream at least fifty miles long.

II

It was snowing, and snowing hard. Moreover, it had been snowing all night, and all the afternoon before. The wind rioted furiously over the broad Missouri plains, alternately building up huge castles of snow and throwing them down again like a fretful child; overtaking the belated teamster on his homeward journey, clutching him with its icy hand, and leaving him buried in a tomb more spotless than the fairest marble; howling, shrieking, racing madly to and fro, never out of breath, always the same tire-



less, pitiless, awful power. Rocks, fields, sometimes even forests were blotted out of the landscape. A mere hyphen upon the broad, white page, lay the Western-bound train. The fires in the locomotives (there were two of them), had been suffered to go out, and the great creatures waited silently together, left alone in the storm, while the snow drifted higher and higher upon their patient backs.

When Bob had waked that morning to find the tempest more furious than ever and the train stuck fast in a huge snow-bank, his first thought was of dismay at the possible detention in the narrow limits of the Pullman, which seemed much colder than it had before; his next was to wonder how the change of fortune would affect Gertrude Raymond. Of course he had long ago become acquainted with the brown traveling suit and fur collar. Of course there had been numberless little services for him to perform for her and the old gentleman, who had indeed proved to be her father. Bob had already begun to dread the end of the journey. He had gone to his berth the night before, wishing that San Francisco were ten days from Boston, instead of six. Providence having taken him at his word, and indicated that the journey would be of at least that duration, if not more, he was disposed, like no few of his fellow-mortals, to grumble.



Once more he became misanthropic. "There 's Miss Raymond, now," he growled to himself, knocking his head savagely against the upper berth in his attempt to look out through the frosty pane,

"sitting over across the aisle day after day with her kid gloves, and all that. Nice enough, of course," recalling one or two spirited conversations where hours had slipped by like minutes, "but confoundedly useless, like the rest of 'em. If she were like mother, now, there 'd be no trouble. She 'd take care of herself. But as it is, the whole car will be turned upside down for her to-day, for fear she 'll freeze, or starve, or spoil her complexion, or something."

Here Bob turned an extremely cold shoulder on the window, and having performed a sort of horizontal toilet, emerged from his berth, his hair on end, and his face expressive of utter defiance to the world in general, and contempt of fashionable young ladies in particular.



At that moment Miss Raymond appeared in the aisle, sweet and rosy as a June morning, her cheeks glowing, and her eyes sparkling with fun.

"Good-morning, Mr. Estabrook," she said demurely, settling the fur collar about her neck.

Bob endeavored to look dignified, and was conscious of failure.

"Good-mo-morning," he replied with some stiffness, and a shiver which took him by surprise. It *was* cold, jumping out of that warm berth.

"I understand we must stay—but do n't let me detain you," she added with a sly glance at his hair.

Bob turned and marched off solemnly to the masculine end of the car, washed in ice-water, completed his toilet, and came back refreshed. Breakfast was



formally served as usual, and then a council of war was held. Conductor, engineers and brakemen being consulted, and inventories taken, it was found that while food was abundant, the stock of wood in the bins would not last till noon. There were twelve railroad men and thirty-five passengers on board, some twenty of the latter being immigrants in a second-class behind the two Pullmans.

The little company gathered in the snow-bound car looked blankly at each other, some of them instinctively drawing their wraps more tightly about their shoulders, as if they already felt the approaching chill.

It was miles to the nearest station in either direction. Above, below, on all sides, was the white blur of tumultuous, wind-lashed snow.

The silence was broken pleasantly. Once more Bob felt the power of those clear, sweet tones.

"The men must make up a party to hunt for wood," she said. "While you 're gone, we women will do what we can for those who are left."

The necessity for immediate action was evident, and without further words the council broke up, to obey her suggestion.

A dozen men, looking like amateur Esquimaux, and floundering up to their armpits at the first step, started off through the drifts. One of the train-men, who knew the line of the road thoroughly, was sure they must be near a certain clump of trees where plenty of wood could be obtained. Taking the precaution to move in single line, one of the engineers,



a broad-shouldered six-footer, leading the way, and steering by compass, they were soon out of sight. As they struck off at right angles to the track, Bob thought he recognized a face pressed close to the pane and watching them anxiously; but he could not be sure.

Two hours later the men appeared once more, some staggering under huge logs, some with axes, some with bundles of lighter boughs for kindling. In another five minutes smoke was going up cheerily from the whole line of cars; for the trees had proved to be less than a quarter of a mile distant, and the supply would be plentiful before night.

When Bob Estabrook stamped into his own car, hugging up a big armful of wood, he was a different looking fellow from the trim young lawyer who was wont to stand before the jury seats in the Boston Court House. He had on a pair of immense blue yarn mittens, loaned by a kindly brakeman, his face was scratched with refractory twigs, his eyebrows were frosted, his mustache an icy caret, two finger-tips frozen, and with all this, he looked and felt more manly than ever before in his life.

His eye roved through the length of the car as it had that first night in the depot. She was not there. He was as anxious as a boy for her praise.

"Guess I 'll take it into the next car," he said apologetically to the nearest passenger; "there 's more coming, just behind."

She was not in the second Pullman. Of course she was n't in the baggage-car. Was it possible—?

He entered the third and last car, recoiling just a bit at the odor of crowded and unclean poverty which met him at the door.

Sure enough, there she sat—his idle, fashionable type of inutility—with one frowsy child upon the seat beside her, two very rumpled-looking boys in front, and in her arms a baby with terra-cotta hair. Somehow, the baby's hair against the fur collar did n't look so badly as you would expect, either. She seemed to be singing it to sleep, and kept on with her soft crooning as she glanced up over its tangled red locks at snowy Bob and his armful of wood, with a look in her eyes that would have sent him cheerfully to Alaska for more, had there been need.



III

WITH the comfortable heat of the fires, the kind offices of nearly all the well-dressed people to the poorer ones—for they were not slow, these kid-gloved Pullman passengers, to follow Miss Raymond's example—the day wore on quietly and not unpleasantly toward its close. Then some one suddenly remembered that it was Christmas Eve.

"Dear me!" cried Miss Raymond, delightedly, reaching round the baby to clap her hands; "let 's have a Christmas party!"

A few sighed and shook their heads, as they thought of their own home firesides; one or two

smiled indulgently on the small enthusiast; several chimed in at once. Conductor and baggage-master were consulted, and the spacious baggage-car "specially engaged for the occasion," the originator of the scheme triumphantly announced. Preparations commenced without delay. All the young people put their heads together in one corner, and many were the explosions of laughter as the programme grew. Trunks were visited by their owners and small articles abstracted therefrom to serve as gifts for the immigrants and train-men, to whose particular entertainment the evening was by common consent to be devoted.



Just as the lamps were lighted in the train, our hero, who had disappeared early in the afternoon, returned dragging after him a small, stunted pine tree, which seemed to have strayed away from its native forests on purpose for the celebration. On being admitted to the grand hall, Bob further added to the decorations a few strings of a queer, mossy sort of evergreen. Hereupon a very young man with light eyebrows, who had hitherto been inconspicuous, suddenly appeared from the depths of a battered trunk, over the edge of which he had for some time been bent like a siphon, and with a beaming face produced a box of veritable, tiny wax candles! He was "on the road," he explained, for a large wholesale toy-shop, and these were samples. He guessed he could make it all right with the firm.

Of course the affair was a great success. I have no space to tell of the sheltered walk that Bob con-

structed of rugs, from car to car; of the beautified interior of the old baggage-car, draped with shawls and brightened with bits of ribbon; of the mute wonder of the poor immigrants, a number of whom had just arrived from Germany, and could not speak a word of English; of their unbounded delight when the glistening tree was disclosed, and the cries of "*Weihnachtsbaum! Weihnachtsbaum!*" from their rumpled children, whose faces waked into a glow of blissful recollection at the sight. Ah! if you could have seen the pretty gifts; the brave little pine (which all the managers agreed could n't possibly have been used had it been an inch taller); the improvised tableaux, wherein Bob successively personated an organ-grinder, a pug dog, and Hamlet, amid thunders of applause from the brakemen and engineers! Then the passengers sang a simple Christmas carol, Miss Raymond leading with her pure soprano, and Bob chiming in like the diapason of an organ.



Just as the last words died away a sudden hush came over the audience. Could it be an illusion, or did they hear the muffled but sweet notes of a church bell faintly sounding without? Tears came into the eyes of some of the roughest of the immigrants as they listened, and thought of a wee belfry somewhere in the Fatherland, where the Christmas bells were calling to prayers that night. The sound of the bells ceased, and the merriment went on, while the young man with eyebrows lighter than ever, but with radiant face, let himself quietly into the

car unnoticed. It had been his own thought to creep out into the storm, clear away the snow from the nearest locomotive bell, and ring it while the gayety was at its height.

All this indeed there was, and more ; but to Bob, the joy and sweetness of the evening centered in one bright face. What mattered it if the wind roared and moaned about the lonely, snow-drifted train, while he could look into those brown eyes and listen to that voice for whose every tone he was fast learning to watch? Truly, it was a wonderful evening altogether.

Well, the blockade was raised, and the long railroad trip finished at last. But two of its passengers, at least, have agreed to enter upon a still longer journey.

She says it all began when he came staggering in with his armful of wood and his blue mittens ; and he? he doesn't care at all when it began. He only realizes the joy that has come to him, and believes that after a certain day next May it will be Christmas for him all the year round.





IX

TREASURE TROVE; A CHRISTMAS STORY

EVERYBODY in that part of the city knew Old Claus; that is, they knew him by sight; very few had ever spoken to him or heard his voice. The grocer and the provision man, and one or two others said he was civil enough to them, that his name was Jonathan R. Claus, spelt with a *u*, not a *w*, and that he paid his bills promptly. That was about all anybody knew of him.

What a surly, grim old man he was, as you met him on a cold winter's afternoon on his way home from his marketing; his long white hair and beard blowing about his head, his forehead puckered into a frown, his stout cane striking the pavements as if he hated the very earth he walked on!

Grown people gave him the width of the sidewalk; children shouted after him,

> "Old Claus,
> Show your claws!"

and then dodged around the corner in terror, although

he had never been known to punish or even chide one of them, save by a dark look from beneath his shaggy eyebrows. Ah, a gloomy, silent, mysterious fellow he was, to be sure; and many a mother in that neighborhood frightened her child into good behavior by threatening to call in Old Claus.

One cold December evening, when the twilight had fallen early, hastened by leaden skies and a few shivering flakes of snow, he sat in his own room, solitary as usual, and even more than usually grim, for he was thinking over his past.

Now, thinking over one's past may be a very cheerful occupation or a very gloomy one. Old Claus undoubtedly found his full of shadows.

He remembered how he was left an orphan, when still a small boy; how he had suffered from cold and want, and had been buffeted and scolded and ill-used, until he ran away from the people who had taken charge of him (he had no home nor friends); how he had worked hard, had saved his money, and had become a very rich man.

Still he had longed to be richer, and, retiring from regular business, he had gone far away to search for a sunken treasure in tropical seas. He had failed to find it, but more eager than ever, he mined for gold, without success. Again, it was the buried hoard of a pirate which attracted him; but months of fruitless labor had been thrown away in a vain attempt to discover exactly where it lay. So he had spent his years, always in search of a Treasure, which had become the ruling idea of his life;



always disappointed; until, embittered, discouraged and alone in the world, though still rich, he had given up the pursuit.

The home he had chosen was as strange as the life he had lived; a huge, old-fashioned house, which had once been occupied by a wealthy family, but had long lain empty, save for the rats that scampered through its wide halls and gloomy chambers, and the spiders that spun their webs unhindered across the blurred window-panes.

The city had grown up about the house, and it was now part of a brick block. Indeed, one wing of the ancient building formed a portion of the tenement house next door, where it seemed as if men wrangled and staggered, and ragged women scolded and wept, and children cried from hunger and cold, all night long. But the walls were very thick, and the occupant of the lonely chamber heard them not.

"Christmas Eve," muttered Old Claus to himself. "I heard them say it in the streets. Merry Christmas! merry, merry Christmas!" he repeated bitterly. "Right merry for me. What a wretched, useless failure of a wreck I am!"

As he spoke he stamped his foot angrily upon the floor. There was a crash in the room behind him. Looking over his shoulder, he found that a large picture, an old portrait, the frame of which had been built into the wall and alone remained of the former splendor of the mansion, lay face downward upon the floor. Jarred by his heavy footfall, the





decaying woodwork had at last given way, and let the canvas drop.

Claus' glance wandered to the wall where it had been fastened. Then he started to his feet, the old fire returning to his eyes. In place of the picture was an opening, with a deep space beyond. He raised himself on tiptoe, and saw what appeared to be the top of a flight of steps, built into the thickness of the wall, and leading downward.

"Treasure at last!" he stammered, gazing greedily at the dusty steps, down which a huge rat scrambled, squeaking. "Treasure at last! I knew luck would turn! After all these years! It is mine, it is mine!"

Hastening to the mantel, he took down a small lamp, lighted it with trembling fingers, and dragging a chair to the wall beneath the aperture, climbed up to and into it. Yes, it was plainly a stone flight of steps. What bags of gold must lie at the bottom of that long-hidden passage?

He tested the stairway cautiously with his foot, and, finding it apparently secure, slowly descended, the space being barely wide enough for him to squeeze through.

Eight, nine, ten steps down. Then a sharp turn to the right! two more steps, and he emerged from the narrow passage into what once must have been a huge fireplace, having a hidden door in one side, some freak of the ancient builders, to allow a person to pass from one portion of the old house to the other without detection.

As Claus glanced about him his heart sank. There was no sign of a treasure. The chimney overhead had been stopped with stone slabs, and the original opening of the fireplace was closed by a wooden partition, one panel of which was hinged and bolted so as to form a small door. Doubtless the people in the next house were ignorant of this, and, probably, of the existence of the fireplace itself.

It was very cold, and the disappointed man shivered as he prepared to retrace his steps to his own quarters. Suddenly he heard a noise in the room beyond the fireboard. It was the sound of a child sobbing quietly to itself. In another moment a heavy, drunken step sounded on the bare floor.

"Are ye goin' to stop cryin', Moll, or will I give ye the stick agin?" demanded a woman's harsh voice. "What 's the matter now?"

"I won't—any—more," he could hear the child answer. "I do n't—mean to. Only I was thinkin' it was Christmas to-morrow, and I would n't—get anything,—mother used to"—

"Stop that!" warningly.

It was evidently hard work to control the sobs, now. Old Claus clenched his fist, and resolved that if he heard the sound of a blow, that fireboard would go down.

There was silence for a minute. Then the woman staggered off, muttering: "Do n't let me hear any more from ye the night. Go to sleep, d' ye hear? You must be off with yer basket agin in the mornin'."





Five minutes later a singular sight might have been seen in front of the big house. It was nothing less than Old Claus himself, clad in his shaggy fur coat, setting forth through the darkness and snow, which was now falling fast.

Past liquor saloons ablaze with light and hung, alas! with holly and mistletoe; past the little Mission Church at the corner, where he lingered an instant to catch the notes of a glad Christmas carol; away from the wretched and squalid quarter of the city he marched, halting only when he reached a toy-shop, where there were multitudes of talking dolls and barking dogs and mewing cats and bleating sheep; where people tumbled over each other in their eagerness to buy, and blew into all the toy horns and jingled all the toy pianos and laughed from the pure joy of Christmastide, like God's own little children.

It was a good half hour again before Old Claus dismissed at his own door the boy who had helped him bring home his bundles from that blessed toy-shop. The boy went off whistling, too, with a bright new silver dollar in his pocket.

It took the old man three trips to get his purchases down that secret stairway. I do n't know how he ever got the sled through anyway; nor the big doll with eyes that winked upside down, nor the sheep, nearly life-size, which *baa*-ed loudly in the passage; and the tricycle was the worst of all; but he did it and landed them safely in the old fireplace, which surely never contained such precious

fuel before. Why, the very smell of the toys, a delicious painty, gluey, varnishy, woolly, sawdusty smell, was enough to set you wild with delight. It brought to Old Claus some dim remembrance of his childhood, and made him pause to wipe away a tear with his shaggy sleeve. For all this time he was in fur coat and cap, with snow lying thick upon them.



Now came the trying moment. Could he open that long-disused door without waking the child, who now was evidently sleeping soundly?

Dear old door—I believe it knew, as well as you do, what was wanted of it. Never a squeak it gave, as Claus, with infinite pains, drew back the rusty bolt and softly opened it.

He stepped inside the room, shading the lamp with his hand. It was a very small room indeed, with great holes in the bare plastering, and a broken pane of glass through which the keen wind was blowing. The room was even colder than the fireplace.

In one corner was a small bed, and in it lay a little girl of perhaps six years, her tangled hair scattered over the bundle of ragged clothes—evidently her own poor little gown—that served for a pillow; the dingy counterpane drawn tightly up around her neck to keep out the bitter cold. There was a broken chair and wooden table in the room besides; nothing else.

From the back of the chair, which was propped against the wall close by the bed, hung one small stocking; so small that it seemed better fitted for a



doll than a living human child ; only no self-respecting doll would have worn a stocking so ragged.

The old man set down his lamp and tiptoed back to the fireplace. He took out the toys one by one, and placed them on the floor. He filled the poor little stocking with candy ; the first package of which came near betraying him by falling directly through a large hole in the heel. Luckily he caught it before it reached the floor, and squeezed in a good-sized rubber ball to replace it.

Last of all he took up the sheep, with a sigh of relief at his success in depositing all his gifts in the room without disturbing the small sleeper.

But alas for human calculations ! In his excitement he gave that dreadful sheep an unlucky squeeze, and without the slightest warning it gave utterance to another prolonged *baa-a-a !* even louder than before.

The child opened her eyes wide and sat up in bed. There stood, in front of a new and cavernous fireplace in the wall, an old man with shaggy coat and cap, and flowing white beard, his stooping back sprinkled with snow, with a lamb in his arms, and surrounded with such a glory of toys as she had never dreamed of in her little starved life.

One moment only she gazed ; then leaped from her bed and sprang into his arms, crying : " O Santa Claus ! Santa Claus ! Have you come ! Oh, take me away with you, do, do ! "

At the child's first cry of " Santa Claus ! " the old man stood stupefied, shaking his head and mutter-

ing "Jonathan R."; but when she came flying to him, he caught her up in his arms, wrapping his great fur coat about her and holding them close to his heart—God's little lamb and the woolly one—without a word.

Before he could fairly collect his wits, he heard that heavy, irregular footfall coming up the stairs.

He had only one thought—to save the child. Backing hastily into the fireplace he closed and bolted the door behind him, groped his way up the stone steps, and sat down in front of his own fire, breathless, with his new-found treasure still in his arms. The faint sound of a cry came up from the room below, but whether it was of terror, or delight at finding such extraordinary personal property miraculously substituted for the late occupant, he could not tell.

The light of the fire, on which Claus had thrown fresh fuel, shone upon the child face upraised to his.

"What is your name, little one?" he asked in tones he hardly recognized as his own.

They called her Moll, she said, but that was not her real name, which she had forgotten.

"How would you like to be called 'Agnes'?" said Claus, his old eyes growing misty over some long-buried memory.

"Oh, that's a nice name, Santa Claus! And I 'm *so* sleepy!"

The old housekeeper was thereupon roused from her slumbers in a distant corner of the house, and



the child put to bed in her own room in a couch hastily improvised from chairs and blankets.

Next morning Old Claus, feeling very much more like Young Claus than he had for years, put an end to the wonderful stories flying about the neighborhood by acknowledging his own agency in little Agnes' disappearance. An arrangement was easily made with the dissipated woman who, it seemed, had taken charge of the child and ill-used her cruelly since her mother's death. The proper papers having been drawn, Mr. Jonathan Claus became the legal guardian of the little waif, with whom he shortly afterward removed to a more cheerful quarter of the city.

Agnes lost all her Christmas presents, to be sure, for not one of them ever could be found—except the sheep which had brought her good fortune, and who was allowed to *baa* to his heart's content that Christmas day; but Santa Claus (as she persisted in calling her deliverer) replaced them, with interest.

That is the way Old Claus found his treasure; not only little Agnes, though she soon became dearer to him than all his wealth, but that most precious of treasures, Love.





X

CHARITY AND EVERGREEN

I

"WELL, for my part, I could never, never forgive a man who did such a thing!"

It was late in the afternoon of a clear, cold day in December when Charity Holmes, sitting in the midst of a spicy mound of evergreen on Farmer Ralston's kitchen floor, and looking up from her work with a bright flush on her pretty cheeks, made this severe remark. Of the three other women in the room, two, the farmer's daughters, young girls like herself, were quite of her opinion; but the fourth, a white-haired old lady with lavender bows on her cap and sunshine in her motherly face, patted the nearest indignant girl's shoulder reprovingly, and remarked:

"There, there, dears; don't be so hard. We're all on us human, and drink's a terrible thing. Sometimes it don't seem any more a man's fault than tumbling into a hole in the road."



"But if he has dug the hole himself, grandmother"—

Any further argument was interrupted at this point by the appearance of an immense bundle of evergreen at one of the windows, entirely blocking up its small, frosty panes. Presently an honest and merry face showed itself down at one corner.

"It 's Tom, with more green!" cried the two Ralston girls, jumping up and running to the porch door to let in the big brother.

Charity stayed behind with grandmother, but Tom's eyes found her in a twinkling. How demurely she sat there, tying away with all her might, while the awkward fellow made a great to-do piling up his load beside her, and managed to get hold of somebody's hand down among the princess-pines, and—then something happened behind grandmother's back that made somebody's fresh young cheeks pinker than ever.

"Tom, Tom!" cried Charity, shaking her head as soberly as if she had n't been the cause of his mischief.

"Yes, ma'am," answered innocent Tom. "Want some more?"

"Now, Tom, if you 're really going to stay you must work in good earnest. Just pick out some good long strings of 'creeping Jenny' and lay them right beside me—so!"

Thereupon Tom, great, breezy, good-natured Tom, doubled himself up on the floor, boots and all, and pretended to immerse himself, body and mind,



in the complicated task assigned him, meanwhile blundering in the most absurd manner, and continually mistaking that bewildering little hand for the delicate vines, and at the same time winking at grandmother, thereby confusing her and making her feel that she was an accomplice; and in fact conducting himself altogether so outrageously that the girls ended by pelting him with evergreens until he escaped to the woodshed, where the ringing blows of his axe soon gave notice that he was making ready for the blaze in the great fireplace that was to brighten the long winter evening before them.

Charity was the daughter of a neighbor. She and Tom Ralston had played together since they were babies; then, leaving the district school, and entering upon the heavier duties of life, they had grown bashful, and kept away from each other just long enough to find out that they could not possibly do so any longer. So they were engaged, to the quiet satisfaction of both families. The marriage was to be on New Year's and the young folks were working hard on their evergreen trimming, which Tom had promised to take up to the city, a dozen miles away, and sell for them, the day before Christmas. Charity was to go with him, as she had a few little purchases to make; and besides, she had never seen the city at this "holiday season," when it is at its merriest.

Swiftly the full, busy days flew by. The evening before they were to start, Tom was walking home with Charity. As they reached the little plot of



ground before her house they looked up into the starlit, moonlit sky. At least Charity did. I am afraid Tom was finding moon and stars and no end of things more precious to him in the grave brown eyes so near his own.

"No, Tom," said she, answering his look, "I'm just thinking about—up there! and all we can be to each other and the rest of the world."

"My darling! I wish I were a good man, I wish I were stronger! If it were not for you!"—

He checked himself, and she could feel the brace of his muscles under the coatsleeve where her hand rested, as if he were even then fighting with some invisible foe. A light cloud came over the moon's face, and the road and fields, covered with new-fallen snow, looked colder than before. She shivered, and drew more closely to his side. He was quick to read her thoughts, this big, clumsy fellow, and he spoke instantly.

"I know, Rita," he said, softly, stroking her hand and using the pet name that he had made for her when they were children; "I know you 'll stand by me through everything. And, whatever evil things I have in me, with you at my side, I 'll try to put down. Heaven help me!"

He took off his cap, and Charity thought she never saw him look so noble and humble and manly as he did then. The moon, too, was out again, and its light rested like a benediction on his broad forehead, whose veins stood out strangely to-night.

A moment later and he was gone. Charity



watched him striding away across the field until he was out of sight. As she turned to her own home she noticed his tracks and the dark blotches they made on the pure, white surface of the snow before her door. Somehow they troubled her, and, without thinking, she made a little futile brush at the nearest footprint with the corner of her shawl, thus only enlarging and making it more unsightly than before. Then, with a nervous laugh at her own foolish fancies, she entered the house.

II

THE next morning, long before the rest of the family were astir, Charity was sitting at her window, hooded and wrapped for the long ride. How she had looked forward to this day! With refreshing sleep and the sweet hopefulness of morning, all her doubts of the preceding night had flapped away like bats into the darkness where they belonged; and she was as fair and rosy and bright-eyed as the dawn itself when she appeared at the door a few minutes later, in answer to a merry jingle of sleigh-bells. Tom's mood was as happy as her own, and the sturdy little horse jogged along only too fast over the icy road when they had turned his head toward the city.

There was much to talk about. Tom had not been idle these last few days, and had a great deal to tell her about her room in the old Ralston house,



where he was to take her on New Year's day. She listened shyly, glancing up at him now and then with a happy face and starry eyes, as he described the improvements he hoped to make on the farm, and the hay he should take from the new meadow he had just bought, and the hammock he should put up for her under the elms for the long, quiet summer days.

"Only," she broke in eagerly, "you know I must work, too, while you are in the field "—

Then she grew rosy again, and subsided into the great buffalo robes, while Tom wandered inconsequently from the subject, and the horse started ahead suddenly when he was n't by any means expected to, and the dark trees beside the road rustled as if they were singing softly, and—oh, dear! it was a wonderful ride altogether.

"See!" whispered Tom, pointing to the horizon just before them.

A very grave and sweet look came into the girlish face, as she followed his glance and saw the star in the east shining brightly through the swaying pine boughs.

"Christmas, Christmas," he whispered. "Oh, my darling, what a gift He is giving me on his birthday —how much more precious than the gold and frankincense He received eighteen hundred years ago!"

So they glide along as blessed as if the poor old sleigh, with its odorous load of evergreen and holly, were a heavenly chariot bearing them away from everything low and bad and wretched in the world,

until they draw near the city. The houses stand more and more closely together. A milkman passes at full trot, and, seeing the country team and its errand gives them the first jovial greeting of the day. Shutters come down, blinds fly open, boys emerge from side streets, blowing on their fingers and crying the morning papers.

"Mister, gimme some green?" one calls out now and then. And good-natured Tom turns round in his seat, pulls out a bunch of his merchandise and hands it to Charity, that she may have the pleasure of giving it away. Now they are fairly within the long, brick-walled streets, and the city is awake. Tom leaves Charity at the house of a friend and makes an engagement to call for her as soon as his load is sold (half of it has been ordered and engaged already), which will probably be at about four. He will come at five, anyway; if he should miss the hour—here he looks at her slyly and they both have a good laugh at the absurdity of the idea—she can come to the market and find him. Then they will have before them the beautiful Christmas-eve ride home: "When," says Tom solemnly, "the little horse will probably be so tired that we will have to let him walk most of the way!"



III

SWIFTLY the hours of the happy day flew by. Charity completed her humble purchases, which, after all, were hardly more than an excuse for ac-

companying Tom to the city, and drank her fill of the joyous sights and sounds on every side. Early in the afternoon it occurred to her to surprise Tom at his post before the hour they had named. Accordingly she dressed herself for the walk, putting into her pocket a little purse she had bought as a Christmas gift for him, and planning to give it to him then and there, so that he might bring home in it the results of the day's sales. With a little inquiry she found her way through the crowded streets to the market, which was like a huge beehive—except that the bees had no stings. For on everybody's face was the starlight of Christmas, and good-will toward men reigned supreme. The sidewalks outside the market were simple avenues of evergreen. It hung in festoons from the sides of the buildings and overhead; it bubbled over from innumerable boxes and barrels, and ran along the snowy curbstone in a fragrant stream. Rows of trees leaned complacently against the posts and each other, meditating on glories to come; holly glistened and twinkled in the red winter sunlight at every window, and a few stout, jolly-looking marketmen had even procured sprays of real English mistletoe, which they hung proudly over their shop doors; but the full advantage of which, judging from the freedom with which they allowed no end of pretty girls to pass to and fro under it without molestation, they by no means appreciated. Charity was delighted with everything, and half expected to see the jovial "Ghost of Christmas Present" him-



self seated amidst the heaps of plenty, scattering good things right and left. Failing of him, the next best would certainly be Tom ; whom, however, she sought in vain. It was just three o'clock when she started again, a little wearily, for the house.

" I must have just missed him," she thought, " and he 'll be there waiting for me."

No, Tom was not there, and had not been seen. Charity fingered the purse in her pocket a little nervously, and waited. How brightly the sun shone in the quiet street where her friends lived! The snow had begun to melt here and there, and children, finding it properly moist for their play, were tumbling about in it and making forts, men, and snowballs. One keen-eyed little fellow moulded a lot of large oblong-shaped balls, and came with an armful before the window where Charity sat, making a mocking bow to her, and calling out :



" Who wants to buy my nice melons ! Here 's your fine fresh fruit ; all ripe ; all ripe ! "

Still no Tom. Charity tried to talk with her hosts, but it was hard work, and she was glad when they left her to wait silently with her eyes on the distant street corner where she had last seen him and his evergreen. People came and went along the brick sidewalk. There were little icy spots just in front of her window, where the gutter had discharged the drip from the roof, and it had frozen in ridges the night before. She became dully interested in watching the passers-by get over this place. Some approached it cautiously and crept with timid

steps across the treacherous surface; some did not see it at all until they were fairly upon it, and escaped with a slide and a bound; some avoided it altogether by making a wide circuit into the street; children slid fearlessly upon it, making sport of what was so dangerous to their elders. One strong, well-built man—a clergyman he appeared from his dress—started across it boldly but carefully, slipped midway, and fell with such a crash that the girl uttered an involuntary cry and started up from her chair; but the man regained his feet and limped away, with an ugly stain across his shoulder and a bit of red on his white hands.



While Charity gazed pityingly after him, a twinkling light appeared far down the street; then another, and another. It could not be that the lamps were being lighted! Yes, the short December day was over—it was Christmas Eve.

Charity turned to look at the clock, but was obliged to move across the room before she could see through the gathering dusk, that it was—six o'clock!

She resolutely but hurriedly drew on her cloak, as she had done a few hours before, in her own country home; and bidding good-bye to her friends with lips which she could not keep from quivering, declined all offer of escort and once more turned her face toward that busy center of the holiday, the market. To and fro she went among the kind-hearted dealers, with her one question repeated over and over until she was sick at heart. No one



had seen Tom since morning, one or two looked at her a little curiously, and once a great burly fellow engaged her very closely in conversation as a tall man in helmet and brass buttons passed them, half carrying, half dragging a poor, battered creature over the slippery sidewalk. It was an old, white-haired man of whose wretched, drunken, despairing face she caught a glimpse, as the throng of idle spectators swept by. Something in the manner of her kind friend made her look up quickly at him. He grew redder than ever, and quickly turned away his head; but it was too late; she knew the truth at last. Tom was like—*that!*

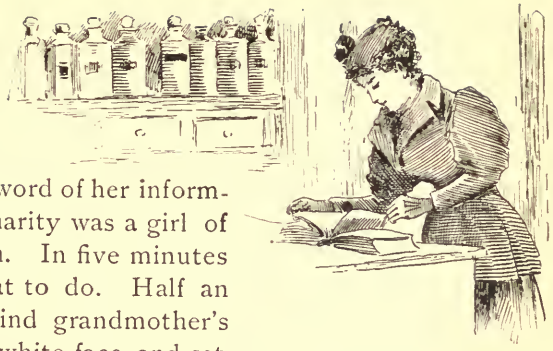
After what seemed days of anguish she found herself in the stifling atmosphere of the railroad station, where she would have to wait two hours for a homeward-bound train. She shrank into a corner and tried to forget herself in sleep, but every faculty was on the alert with an unnatural tension. Women with tired faces and illy dressed babies sank upon the seats about her and silently waited for their trains, or in jarring, monotonous voices, and the minor keys always used by late passengers, discussed the ailments of their neighbors and the high price of goods. A crowd of rough fellows sauntered by outside the windows and filled the air with coarse jokes and snatches of ribald song. Charity clenched her little hands that Tom had kissed under the princess-pine and endured it all, with her eyes on the grimy face of the clock, until the train backed into the station and bore her away.



At a little before midnight she reached her own home. While she stood on the worn door-stone, her whole frame trembling from exhaustion and the long agony of that evening, her eyes fell on Tom's footprints of the night before. For one moment a hard look came into her face; then she suddenly stooped, kissed the light snow as if it had been a cold, dead face, and moaning, "O Tom, Tom, how could you!" with a sob like that of a hurt child, turned and went in out of the night. And this was her Christmas Eve.

IV

WHEN Charity awoke next morning the sun was shining cheerfully in upon the smooth yellow floor of her little room and its mats of braided rags. The sky was of the bluest and the earth of the whitest; a flock of sparrows were wishing each other Merry Christmas in the boughs of an old apple-tree near by; the cattle in the barn, contentedly ruminating over their morning allowance of hay, seemed rehearsing to each other the old story of the manger and the wonderful night in Palestine. As these pleasant sights and sounds stole in upon the girl's senses, a happy smile broke upon her lips and she felt at peace with the whole world. Then came, like a flash of red lightning out of the sparkling blue sky, the memory of the preceding day. Her brain reeled under the shock of returning recollection, as,



one by one, every kindly evasive word of her informants came back to her. But Charity was a girl of quick impulses and decided action. In five minutes she had made up her mind what to do. Half an hour later she was standing behind grandmother's chair at Farmer Ralston's with white face and set lips. The family, she found, were somewhat concerned about Tom's absence, but they had not been in any real alarm, as he might have changed his plans and remained in the city, leaving Charity with her friends for the night. Now they crowded about her, all asking questions at once, and growing momently more frightened at her silence. She managed to tell them that Tom had not kept his appointment—that she could learn nothing definite about him—that she had guessed from what little information she had been able to obtain, that he had been taken sick and carried to the hospital—or somewhere; it was nothing serious, she was sure, and at any rate she was going up to the city that morning on the train to find out all about it. Tom's father was too old and feeble to undertake the trip, and his sister had better not leave home that day—Christmas. She could do better alone, as she knew the streets pretty well (here her voice failed her a little), and besides, it would only worry Tom to see them all coming. So she went as she wished to, alone.

Arriving in the city, she examined a directory in the nearest drug store and copied off the numbers and localities of all the police stations in the city



proper. Then she found her way without much trouble to the market and asked the tall, broad-shouldered policeman on duty there for directions to the nearest station. He looked down pityingly on the young girl, appealing to him with her white face and eyes that betrayed her suffering on that glad Christmas morning.

"Nothing serious, is it, miss? A fight, maybe, or something o' that sort?"

"Oh, no, sir! I only want to see if—if—somebody"—

The kind-hearted officer guessed her trouble immediately.

"I see, I see," said he, softening his voice still more. "He did n't get home last night after he was paid off. Well, I guess you 'll find it all right; anyway, I hope you will. Take your first turn to the left, and two blocks further you 'll come to my station. Tell the sergeant you saw Brown, and that I sent you to him for information."

Charity thanked him with a grateful look that was better than words, and moved with rapid steps along the icy sidewalk in the direction indicated. She was courteously received at the station, but no one knew anything about Tom. Nor did they in the next station she visited, nor in the third or fourth. It was now nearly noon, and people were beginning to sit down to their Christmas dinners. The table at Farmer Ralston's was always a jolly place, and at Christmas time the fun was uproarious. Charity had been invited every year since she could remem-

ber, and she gave a little gulp as she thought of the row of bright, laughing faces that would have been gathered in the old kitchen, still sweet with the resinous odors of the evergreen that had lain there in piles in those last happy days that now seemed ages ago. Wearily she mounted the granite steps of Station Five and repeated her question. The lieutenant, a brisk, wiry man, with a heavy gray moustache and little, piercing eyes, cast a quick glance at her and consulted his book. Presently he gave a little nod, and raising his voice, called out, "Norcross, here a minute!"

A uniformed officer in an adjoining room opened himself like a kind of long jack-knife, rose from the bench where he had been reclining and stood at the walnut rail in front of his superior, awaiting orders. The lieutenant took a key from the rack at his side and handed it to Norcross.

"This lady wants to see No. 3. Show her down."

The officer bowed respectfully and led the way down a flight of stone steps into what at first appeared to be a sort of cellar, with grated windows near the ceiling on one side and a row of iron-barred doors on the other.

"There," said the officer, pointing.

Charity paused a moment and pressed her hand against her heart; for a moment she could not have spoken, it beat so fiercely. Then she advanced across the brick floor, and standing by the door of Cell No. 3, looked in through the bars.



At first she could see nothing, but, as her eyes be-

came accustomed to the dim light, she could distinguish at one side a narrow iron bed, and lying motionless upon it, his head buried in his arms, a crumpled, stained, wretched figure—yes, Tom!

The rustle of the girl's dress fell upon his ear. He raised his head slightly, recognized the sound, turned away again without looking her in the face, and shook with such a tempest of sobs that Charity trembled and could not speak the grave, deliberate words she had prepared on the way.

"Landlord, fill the flowing bowl!"

sang some poor creature shrilly, two or three doors away. How Charity remembered all these things afterward! While the officer stepped aside to quiet the noisy prisoner she forced herself at last to speak.

"Mr. Ralston"—Tom started, and she saw his grasp tighten on the iron rail of the bed, "I have come to take you away from this place. I shall send for the bail commissioner at once" (she had learned her lesson well, poor child!), "so that you can catch the two o'clock train. No!" she went on quickly, checking him with a gesture as he was about to speak, "you must n't stay here another night, nor another hour. It would kill your father if he knew it, and we couldn't answer his questions to-night."



The strong man bowed his head again, without a word. She hesitated an instant, then left him, and walked across the floor and up the stone stairway with a firm step. Tom looked after her wistfully, but she did not even glance toward his cell. Within

half an hour he was sent for, and found Charity, with the commissioner and the sergeant, sitting behind the rail, in the room above. The bail was quickly arranged, the officer handed over a jack-knife and a few coppers he had taken from Tom's pockets the night before, and told him he could go where he pleased until nine o'clock the next morning, when the court opened.

There was a constrained silence for a moment in the little office. At last Tom raised his eyes, with a look in them half questioning, half appealing, to the girl's white face, at the same time involuntarily extending his hand toward her. For the first time in his life he found no response in the brown eyes, staring stonily out of the barred windows.



His hand slowly dropped to his side. With a dazed look he turned first to the officers, then to Charity, as if he did not understand. Still there was no response in the brown eyes, staring stonily out of the barred windows. Still Tom stood there helplessly, not quite understanding it all. Glancing at his stained and rumpled clothes he brushed them a little, mechanically, passed his hand over his forehead once or twice, then turned humbly toward the door, passed out bareheaded and was gone.

How Charity found her way home she never knew. When she entered her own little chamber at dusk and buried her aching head in her pillow, she had a vague recollection of wandering about the gay city streets for hours, of finally seeking the railroad station, of cooling her hot forehead against

the frosty pane of the car, and watching the snow-flakes that came faster and faster from the darkening sky. Tom had come home, the station-master had told her carelessly, and that was all she cared to know.

How he endured the ignominy of appearing and paying his fine in the municipal court the next day, she did not ask; nor did she even see him for a week. After the excitement of that gloomy Christmas came, with the reaction, a complete nervous exhaustion, which mercifully spared her the torture of questioning eyes and tongues until beyond New Year's—that should have been her wedding-day.

Meanwhile she wavered irresolutely between one and another course of action. Now she felt she must cry out to him to forgive her own cruel hardness in his time of trouble; now the Puritan blood she had inherited asserted itself, and her face grew hard again as she thought of his weakness.

The meeting could be put off no longer. It came, and in the same dear old kitchen where they had worked together. The man looked straight into her eyes and said, quietly:



"Charity, I have done you and myself a great wrong. I shall try to do better. God knows how hard I shall try—am trying! Will you forgive me? Will you help me?"

After all, she was hardly prepared for this, and though she began bravely enough with, "Mr. Ralston," she soon broke down altogether. "Of course," she told him, "the wedding must be postponed indefinitely. Further than that—I can't tell what—

O Tom! how could"— she began afresh, but stopped at his look, and slowly walked out of the room and house.

V

SLOWLY the long weeks of late winter succeeded each other, alike monotonous, gray and dreary. Tom Ralston worked, at first manfully, then doggedly, on the farm, fighting with a strong will against public opinion and private temptation. Everybody had heard of his fall. Young girls eyed him curiously from the opposite side of the road, and the frequenters of the village store gathered at night to sit around the stove, heels in air, and bring out stories of old Major Ralston, two or three generations back, whose dissipations had been town talk; and the gossips gravely wagged their heads and said: "'T was bound to crop out sooner or later."



So passed the icy months, and song-sparrows and bluebirds began to flit among the naked boughs like dreams of spring. Following them came the robins, plump and cheery embodiments of summer. One morning in April the maples and oaks stretched out their arms, full of rosy and restless baby leaves born in the night. The heats of July parched the land; September laid her gentle hand upon its brow until it was refreshed and slept.

Still Tom Ralston worked on, through sun and shower, seed-time and harvest, beginning at last to



win approving nods and kindly smiles and words from his self-appointed critics. Still Charity, with heavy heart, went about her routine of household duties, from which all the sweetness, the vague looking forward, the pretty, girlish longing which had of late clothed them were gone. When she met Tom, as she was often obliged to, she spoke not coldly indeed, but as to a mere acquaintance. Right or wrong, she had conscientiously chosen her course, and she would keep it to the end. She would never marry a man who might become a drunkard, and perhaps leave his curse to be inherited by his innocent children.



It was five days before Christmas when Charity, having finished her daily tasks, stole away to spend the last hour or two of the short winter afternoon in her favorite walk, an old logging-path through the pine woods. The air was deliciously clear and sweet. Overhead, a flock of chickadees called to her merrily, and hung upside down among the tasseled boughs in search of insects and other small bird food. Not an anxious search, by any means; rather a contented one, on the whole, as if they were quite sure their daily bread had been given them, and they were only to see that it was not wasted. Charity half unconsciously took note of their happy little movements to and fro, as, for the hundredth time, she went over and over the arguments against forgiving Tom. She had just reached the triumphant "lastly," in her course of reasoning, when, suddenly startled by the breaking of a twig, she glanced up, to see the



subject of her syllogisms not twenty feet away, gathering evergreen. Like the rushing waters of a great tide, sweeping away her artificial landmarks and barriers, came the overwhelming conviction that it was she, and not the man before her, who needed forgiveness.

At the sound of her dress, Tom, too, had started up, as he did in the cell a year ago; but presently went on with his task, stooping low over a refractory vine of princess pine.

"It was the least I could do," he said humbly, and with evident effort. "I shall take it up to the city myself and sell it for the girls."

Something in her very silence, or perhaps a slight exclamation that escaped her lips, made him look up. She stood there, alternately paling and flushing, with a look in her eyes he had not seen for many a long day. He sprang to his feet, but she put out her hand to check him.

"Tom," she began, with quivering lip, "dear Tom, can you forgive"—

What was the use of her hand then! If she had been surrounded by Napoleon's Old Guard I believe Tom would have got at her somehow. Forgive her! Bless you, if you had seen him for the next five minutes, or had heard them talk as they walked home together beneath the pines, you would have been puzzled to know which forgave or which was forgiven, or which had done right or wrong, or whether either had ever doubted the other for an instant of their lives.

"'Suffereth long and is kind,'" whispered grandmother that night, stroking the girl's brown hair.

Of course Tom went home with her afterward, in the old way, and made footprints again before her door, while the moon smiled to itself and poured down its silvery blessing upon them.

So they had a merry Christmas after all, and a New Year's wedding, on which occasion grandmother was resplendent in fresh ribbons, and the girls laughed and cried by turns.

The hard, dreary year of Tom's struggle is long since past, but as Christmas-tide draws nigh and the wreaths are hung at the windows, Charity Ralston, the dearest and brightest little woman in all the country, looks fondly into her husband's strong, manly face, and lays her cheek upon his shoulder in a way that tells him she remembers. He, too, has never forgotten, and, standing there in the twilight, with the sweet Christmas incense of the evergreen about them, he tells her again how he endured, and hoped, and loved, and ends by holding her close in his arms, while she whispers, "Merry Christmas, Tom!"





XI

THROUGH THE STORM

I

"'LISBETH, 'Lisbeth, what ye doin' out there?"

It was a sharp, high-strung voice, yet not loud nor ill-natured. The speaker stood at an open door between the kitchen and an outer porch, the latter built of rough boards and showing little wet streaks on the floor, where the storm had thrust in its snowy fingers the night before. The silence of the place was broken at intervals by a regular series of dull blows, lasting two or three minutes and interspersed with muffled splashings.

"'Lisbeth, can't ye leave off churnin' a minute? I want my specs."

"All right, father, I 'll find 'em for ye: 's—almost —come!" The last words were emphasized by such an energetic pounding that the window-sashes, with their small, old-fashioned panes, rattled like cymbals.

"There! there! ye need n't knock the bottom out'n the churn," said the first speaker, with a movement among the wrinkles of his face that betokened a smile. "I c'n hold on a spell longer, I guess.

Jest bring me in a mug o' the buttermilk when ye 've got threw." The keen air swept through the porch and lifted the leaves of a yellow-covered almanac that hung against the wall. The old man took it down from its nail, and closed the door with a shiver. "Wind 's shiftin' back," he mused. "Soon 's ever I git my glasses I 'll see what the almanac says. 'T ain't much use fer Wesley to break out the road, even 'f the Hill-folks *is* comin'. 'T will be over the walls 'fore the train 's in." He walked slowly to a pile of wood that lay near the fireplace, paused before it a moment, with a shrewd look, whistling in a sort of whisper, then picked out a stout birch stick with the bark hanging in strips and laid it with great deliberation on the fire, which was already crackling and roaring up the chimney in a broad blaze and sending its generous glow to the farthest corner of the room.



A few moments later the door opened and showed a quiet little figure and a cheery face that irresistibly suggested Thanksgiving, Christmas, comfort, and reliableness, all in one. It was evident that if her forty years or so had brought her many sorrows they had given a wonderful inward peace and strength that is not afraid of evil tidings. She was dressed plainly, with her sleeves rolled up to the elbows. "Here 's your milk, father: and there 's your glasses now, right on top of your head," she said, stooping forward a little and speaking in loud, clear tones.

"Lor' sakes! so they be. I declare, I 'm gittin'

so forgitful, 'n' I can't hear no one 'bout the house but you, 'Lisbeth. Strange how my hearin' 's failed me this year! If 't wa' n't for you "— Here his voice quavered a little, but he was happily interrupted by the entrance of a broad-shouldered, clear-eyed young fellow, who advanced to the fire, and, holding out his hands to its genial warmth, stamped off upon the brick hearth a few bits of snow that had clung to his stout boots.



"Well, grandfather, we 've got a 'spell o' weather' this time," he shouted. "Old Bonny Beag has her nightcap on, and I saw two or three flakes as I came in. 'Lisbeth," he continued, "the visitors up at the Hill won't any *more* than get there to-day, I guess. Sam Fifield, down at the depot, says he has orders to have a pung ready for a lot of boxes and a sleigh for the women and children that are coming down to Christmas. I 've broken out as far as the Corner; beyond that it 's good roading for quite a piece. The steers are as near being tired out as ever I saw them. Breakfast 'most ready?"

In a few minutes more the table was pulled out from the wall, and a chip thrust under one of its feet to offset the unevenness of the floor. Upon the spotless cloth were set three blue china plates, with pictures of stately castles rising from lambent seas and numerous swans disporting themselves therein; then came brown-jacketed potatoes, a big pot of coffee, a pile of yesterday's doughnuts, an apple pie with one piece cut out, a plate of smoking hot biscuit, and a dish of golden butter. A small



platter, containing two or three slices of "frizzled" pork, was placed by the old man's plate.

Meanwhile, the starry flakes came faster and faster. Some of the more adventurous alighted on the kitchen window and gazed in until they were finally melted at the sight. A few ventured down into the well, and, drifting against the mossy stones, gave to the slender ferns that peeped from the chinks the food they had gathered in the skies; others found their way through a broad crack into the barn and fell noiselessly upon the floor with its hayseed carpet, thereupon causing much wonderment and grave discussion among the fowls, who were exchanging views in low tones on the topics of the morning. If you had been in the woods, you would have heard the tick-ticking of the tiny crystals, like the dancing of myriads of fairy feet, upon the dry leaves which still clung to the oak and beech.

So fell the snowflakes over meadow and fallow, wood and hill, bringing the materials that should be built up into corn and wheat during the coming year and thus provide food for thousands who would then be reciting their prayers for daily bread, without a thought that the answers had begun so many months before.

Now, either by a preconcerted plan or by an impulse of the moment, one of the most daring of the advance guard of the storm resolved to have a wild ride before he gave up his substance to winds and earth; and so it came about that a chubby nose, which had previously been flattened against one of



the plate-glass windows of a Pullman car on a north-bound train, suddenly withdrew itself, and a childish voice exclaimed, "Oh, Miss Amory, it 's snowing! it 's snowing! Here 's a little mite of a flake on the window. Oh, mamma, won't it be nice sleighing for Santa Claus! He can come right on the tops of the trees: I saw a lot that looked just like frosted cake."

"Yes, dear; yes, dear," said the quiet lady in the next chair, glancing up from her "Seaside" pamphlet. "Only do n't speak so loud, Maurice. You will disturb the other people in the car."



"Miss Amory," persisted the boy, but in lower tones, "won't you go out and coast with me, and take a great, long, long sleigh-ride to-morrow?"

"Yes, Maurice, if mamma would like me to," replied the one addressed, a little wearily. She had not yet quite schooled herself to her position, this young governess, and the constant reference of even such trifles as the boy's request to a higher authority still jarred on her spirits. She had not, indeed, like most paper heroines, been accustomed to the luxuries of wealth, with phalanxes of servants devoting themselves exclusively to her service and amusement, but she had enjoyed the comforts of a well-to-do New England home, the independence of American girlhood, and the priceless blessing of a mother who understood her thoroughly and was always ready to sympathize with her daughter's pleasures and troubles alike, to counsel or remain silent, as the case might be, and to help her out of



all her girlish perplexities, from the choice of a ribbon to the treatment of an importunate suitor. It was a brave thing, this setting her face resolutely to the world, and she had accordingly made up her mind at the start to look for and meet every unpleasant concomitant to her new position without a murmur.

At first she had been uncertain at what door she should knock of all those opening into the tower named Self-Support, but, as she approached, one of them flew open before her hand was raised. A lady who was spending the summer near by gave out word that she wished for a governess to take charge of her two children and accompany them to the city in the autumn. Miss Amory's bright face and gentle ways won the children at first sight. She was retained on trial, and had proved too great a treasure to be relinquished.

Mrs. Walton had been more than kind and considerate, but her very effort to offer attentions and induce the new governess to forget her position only made it more marked, like an erasure upon white paper.

Miss Amory scolded herself twenty times a day, and devoted herself more and more to her duties, but still she could not help looking forward to next summer, when—when—well, beyond that it was all vague. At any rate, there might be some change for the better. Perhaps she could give music-lessons, or could teach school; something she would do where she was her own mistress.



Through the Storm

The train rumbled on, and the storm increased. Twice they had to stop and back before they could push their way through a narrow cut where the huge drifts were wedged in solidly from brim to brim. At last, just as the December light was fading from the sky, hurried by the whirling snow-mist, the cars came to a standstill beside a long, low building, and the conductor shouted, "Haybrook! Haybrook!"

Ten minutes later, two sleighs, one in advance loaded with boxes and parcels, the other with the ladies and the two children, crept slowly up the hill that led from the little brown station to the main road. For a while the houses on each side and a few half-obliterated tracks made navigation comparatively easy; but once out of the village it became a matter of nice calculation. The sleet stung the faces of the drivers and formed little icy crusts over the eyes of the patient horses, who struggled on, setting their hoofs down firmly into the smooth, unbroken sheet of snow and sending it out on either side like foam. Suddenly there was a creak, a lurch, and then a dead stop. The drivers consulted in muffled tones as they examined the harness.

"Broken jest above the buckle; nothing to hitch to."

"Better call up the old man, 'n' get Wesley to help. 'S only a step further 'n the Corner."

In the sleigh, Mrs. Walton and her governess, covered with heavy buffalo-robes, waited patiently. The children fidgeted.

"I want to get out and wade."





"No, Morrie, you just keep still, and perhaps Santa Claus will come along and help us. He must have started by this time."

"H'm! guess reindeers would n't do much good. I wish I had my pony here. Why, Miss Amory, how cold your hand is! Why, you 've been keeping that robe over me, and you 're right out in the cold. See the snow on her sleeve, mamma."

"Oh, I don't mind," interposed the little governess; but her teeth chattered, and it was an intense relief when she heard a new, strong voice just outside: "Where are they, Marston? In that heap of buffaloes?" After a moment's pause, the robes were lifted, and before she could say a word the girl felt herself raised from the sleigh and borne along through the storm in a pair of stout arms, while the same cheery voice said: "Beg your pardon, miss, it 's the only way. The house is but a few rods from here."

"Thank you," she answered smiling, in spite of the cold, at her situation: "but I 'm afraid I shall tire you!"

The young man said nothing, but gravely picked his way between drifts and treacherous hollows. Once he staggered, and nearly fell with his burden. She instinctively threw her arm round his neck like a child, to save herself, withdrawing it quietly a moment after. He plodded on in silence.

"He 's a gentleman," she thought, "or he would have laughed or joked about it."

Close behind them the men were following with

those left in the sleigh, and the whole company were soon gathered around 'Lisbeth's fire, exchanging comments, throwing aside their snowy wraps, and refreshing themselves with hot tea.

"Just like a desert island," whispered Maurice.

"Only savages do n't have doughnuts and milk," returned Edie, helping herself liberally.

The fire leaped higher and glowed more and more ardently in its efforts to warm the castaways, until they were glad to draw back their chairs from the hearth,—all except the little governess, who was still chilled through and through, although she meekly drank three cups of hot tea in succession, and crouched as near the friendly fire as she could without scorching the pretty dark-blue traveling dress. Little ripples of shiver seemed to run over her from head to foot, like a cold breeze.

"I think, if you please, I 'll go to my room," she said at last, with a grateful look at 'Lisbeth, who was watching her anxiously, and who doubtless supposed her to be a relative, probably the children's aunt. "Governess" was an idea that had not struck Haybrook, except through the medium of an old English novel or two.

"Well, just step right in here," she said, sympathetically; "and do n't you get up till ye 're called in the mornin'."

As she spoke she opened one of the little, gray, uneven doors behind her guests, and lighting a tallow candle in a knobby brass candlestick, placed it upon some article of furniture within.



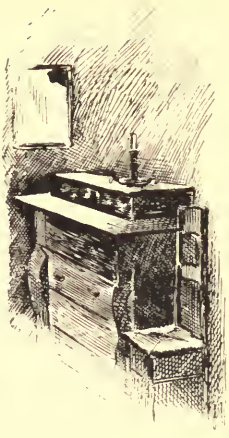
"Good-night," she said again, kindly. "Don't let me disturb ye by my travelin' round the kitchen gettin' breakfast. You can leave the door open a crack for company, if you 're lonesome."

II

WHEN Florence Amory opened her eyes the next morning, she was at a loss for some minutes to determine her own position in the great white world that lay around her. Then the events of the preceding night marshaled themselves into line one by one, and at the same time came the consciousness that she possessed a head,—a most unmanageable one, too. It danced and whirled in such an uncomfortable way that she was glad to shut her eyes once more.



Presently the sound of an old-fashioned coffee-mill, with its unwilling halts and sudden compliances, fell upon her ear in such close proximity that there was no mistaking the character of the adjoining room. A moment or two later the crushed berries sent through the keyhole a delicious whiff of aroma that spread itself through the room. Encouraged by this appeal to two of her senses, the girl once more took a survey of her quarters. A narrow bedroom, with just space enough beside the high-posted bed on which she lay to permit one person to pass; a chest of drawers, with shining brass handles that tinkled faintly in response to footsteps in another



part of the house ; one or two straight-backed chairs: these completed the furniture of the room, with the exception of a small looking-glass (one corner gone), a frame washstand, and a tiny yellow table. The windows were hung with green paper curtains. Just as she finished this journey around her room, her head took another flight, and was hardly down again when the door opened softly and the cheery face of 'Lisbeth peeped in. Seeing that the stranger was awake, she advanced to the bedside and bent over the flushed face upon the pillow.

" How 'd ye sleep ? " she inquired, softly brushing aside a stray lock or two of brown hair, as a mother might have done, from the tired young forehead.

" Not very much, I 'm afraid. I 'm not much rested: my head does n't feel quite right; " and she tried to smile.

" Well,"—this woman had a strong, comfortable way of beginning her sentences with that monosyllable, which seemed to put quite out of sight all doubts and difficulties in the way, and carried with it a conviction that everything was coming out just right,—" well, there 's nothing in the world to do but to stay just where you be. Your folks ain't up yet, and won't be this two hours. I 'm goin' to brown ye a piece of bread, and the tea 'll be ready by the time that 's done: it 's drawin' now, front of the fire."

" Oh, indeed I must get up. The children "—

" Land, the children can dress themselves, or their

mother 'll help 'em if they need anything. Do'n't you say another word, dear, but just shut your eyes and think about something easy,—dandelions in a cloverfield, say, or birds singin' 'long towards night."

The firm steps turned away and again began their journeyings up and down the floor of the adjoining room. Florence closed her eyes willingly enough, and lay perfectly quiet, with a sense of being cared for, such as she had not felt since she left her own home.

The morning light showed dimly through the frosty little panes behind the green curtain. Upon the old-fashioned bureau she could just see, as she glanced up wearily now and then, the shape of her tall brass candlestick, with its long stalactites of tallow hanging from the upper rim. The footsteps plodded to and fro. Pots and pans occasionally interjected a staccato note above the soft purring of the fire and the hum of the teakettle. Then another pair of boots joined the first,—evidently a man's, but managed with wonderful care so as not to disturb the visitors.



Pretty soon the door opened once more, and 'Lisbeth entered, bearing a small japanned tray, upon which were set a plate of toast in tiny slices, a steaming cup of tea, and a sugar-bowl with its pair of silver tongs, slim but solid.

"Now, dear, a bit of this will do you good."

"But I'm not hungry."

"No, poor child, I did n't suppose you would be.

Well" (comfortably again), "suppose I butter a piece of toast,—the littlest piece,—just for you to taste. Maybe 't will make ye sleepy." There was no resisting that, and the feverish girl did manage to take a very wee lunch from the motherly fingers. Then she fell back among the pillows, exhausted.

"If ye can jest ketch a nap now," said 'Lisbeth in a whisper, as if her charge were already in danger of being waked, "it 'll do ye lots of good."

The toast and the hot tea and Lisbeth's whispers must have had a soothing effect, for Florence soon dropped into an uneasy slumber, throughout which, however, she had a continual sense of heat and discomfort. When she awoke, it was broad day. The world was as silent as a dream. To ears accustomed to the roar of a city and the cries and laughter of children at play, the stillness was not a mere negative quality of the air,—an absence of sound,—it was an almost tangible thing, and Florence felt smothered beneath its folds. She pressed her hand to her head, and found it burning hot. Her pulse was throbbing fiercely through her slender wrists.



"Mrs. Eldridge!" she called faintly. She had heard 'Lisbeth so addressed by the driver the night before.

The soft rustle of a woolen dress, and the firm, now familiar footfall, were heard at once. In a moment more the elder woman was holding the hand of the younger.

"I believe—I am afraid—I am going to be ill."

"Well, Miss Amory, 'f you be, you shall be well

taken care of. I 'll tend ye myself, nights; and if there 's anything you want that can be got, why, Elsie 'll get it for ye."

"And is there a physician?"

"Oh, yes 'm; Elsie 's gone for one now. They 'll be here in an hour or two."

"In all this snow?"

"Oh, we do n't mind that, ma'am. Get used to it, you know. The road 's been broke out clean up t' the village, they say, so 's 't the pung 'll go well enough."

"Where are Mrs. Walton and the children? And —please do n't call me ma'am."

'Lisbeth smiled good-humoredly: "I won't, if you won't call me 'Mis' Eldridge.' 'T always makes me feel 's if I must talk just so straight when anybody calls me that. My name 's 'Lisbeth; and if you 'll call me so, why, I 'll call you Florence,—the boy told me your name,—and so we 'll feel better acquainted. Oh, the others? Why, they went along up t' the Hill, to spend Christmas with their folks, about noon to-day. She said you was to stay here till you felt better, if we could keep you. And we can."

That night Florence was worse, and the succeeding days and weeks were but so many chapters of feverish fancies and hot, throbbing pain. The sun climbed higher and the snowbanks sank lower day by day, but she knew nothing of them. Her world was square, her sky a dingy white, her surroundings the changing forms of a disordered dream. The





gray-haired country doctor had peered at her through his spectacles and made the motions of "Typhoid" with his lips to 'Lisbeth. Florence had seen it under her half-closed eyelids, but was too weary to care much. So January came and went, and after it February, before she found herself inclined to take the slightest interest in anything outside of those four walls, with their faded, large-figured paper.

It was a warm, delicious day in early March,—one of those foretastes of spring which in New England match the Indian summer of late autumn. The green curtain swayed slightly back and forth as the sweet south wind crept in through the crannies of the old, warped window-frame. A song-sparrow, perching on the fence just outside, sang his contented little Easter hymn over and over, until the sick girl felt herself being drawn back to life once more, and life seemed beautiful. 'Lisbeth was sitting in the kitchen, with the door half open between, and Florence could hear the soothing creak of her chair as she rocked gently to and fro at her knitting. Presently she called, "Mrs. Eldridge!"

The creaking stopped instantly, and health and life, embodied in 'Lisbeth, entered the room.



"Well, dearie, feelin' a little better, ain't you?"

"Yes, ma'am,"—gratefully. "I want to know, if you please, about things that have happened since I have been ill."

"Oh, that 's a short story. Mrs. Walton 'n' the children went back t' the city six weeks ago, and

left you in my charge. An' it 's precious little trouble you 've been. For my part I 'd rather take care o' ten women, all sick with the typhus, than one man with a headache."

Florence smiled faintly. Then she said, "I have n't heard so many footsteps in the kitchen lately. Have any of your family gone?"

"Bless you, no. That 's only because Elsie 's made a pair o' slippers to wear about the house, so 's not to wake you when you 'd caught a sleep."

"How very kind! Can I see Elsie soon? I should so like to be read to a little bit."

"Why, yes, I s'pose so," said 'Lisbeth rather doubtfully. "I d' know 's there 'd be any objection. Oh, that reminds me. Elsie was over t' the Corner early this morning, and brought these flowers. There 's a greenhouse there, where they keep 'em growing right through the winter. Seems 's if they might have been a little brighter, now, do n't it?"



While she was talking, she stepped into the next room, raising her voice as she went, and returned with a china vase painted gaudily on one side and containing a loose cluster of cut flowers. Florence noticed at the first glance that they were so arranged as to bring the unpainted side of the vase in front; at the second, that they had been chosen thoughtfully. One or two dark heliotropes, white pinks, and a creamy, half-opened rose, with slender ferns for a background: that was all.

"I was going to tie the stems up with a piece of string, but Elsie would have it they 'd wilt quicker,



and would look kind o' sot besides. You was to take out one of the pinks to hold in your hand, if you liked. They last longer 'n the rest."

So the dainty blossom, with its folds within folds of whiteness, was held between the slight girl-fingers, in no way less dainty and delicate than itself. By a sudden impulse Florence pressed it to her lips like a child. "You are all so good to me!" she said, with quivering lips. "I 'm not used to being taken care of. Please thank Elsie for me, and ask her to come in when she can spare the time."

Mrs. Eldridge had been stooping to pick up a shred from the neat carpet, and but half caught the words. "Who d' you say? O, Elsie! Well, I 'll give your message just 's you put it."

But Elsie did not come the next day, nor the next. She began to seem to Florence like some beneficent brownie, doing all her good deeds before the household was awake, and then disappearing until her services were again needed.

At last came the eventful day when the invalid was to be allowed to sit up for half an hour. She had looked forward to the time with eagerness. The old doctor, who had a vein of grim humor under his white beard, gruffly called her his little im-patient. But, to tell the truth, the stiff-backed chairs which she had thus far seen were hardly suggestive of luxurious rest; they were built for well people. Men and women in that part of the country make but little reckoning upon sickness. When it comes,

it is met with a stern and uncompromising resistance; but the thought of humoring it by such compliances as reclining-chairs never for a moment enters their heads. It was, therefore, a genuine surprise when, after an extraordinary amount of whispering and hurrying in the kitchen, the door opened, and, assisted by 'Lisbeth, in walked a chair of such inviting proportions and soft, padded curves that they plainly expressed themselves to the effect that they would be extremely miserable unless reclined upon, and that speedily.

"Why, where did you find that lovely chair?" cried Florence delightedly. "I thought I should have to sit up just as straight!"

"Oh, we jest made it up out of one of the old armchairs in the best room," said the other, surveying the luxurious piece of upholstery with pardonable pride. "You see, Elsie thought it all out, and put us to work, when you said you wanted to set up: so we jest stuffed the back an' arms, and Elsie sawed off the hind legs an' fixed that place for your feet in front, and there you be!"



Five minutes later, Florence sat, weak and trembling after her long inactivity, in the comfortable chintz-covered chair, with a great sense of achievement and a new hold on the realities of life.

"Now, if I could only see Elsie, and thank her."

"And—*what?*"

"Why, tell her how much I thank her for all the trouble she has taken for me."

A queer look came into 'Lisbeth's face, and her

eyes twinkled. "Guess ye 'd better wait till to-morrow," she said. "You 'll feel stronger then, and—she—can come in while you 're settin' up."

"But why not to-day?" persisted the other, with a convalescent's freedom.

"Well, to tell the truth, Elsie's busy to-day out-doors, and won 't be in till you 're abed again; and then you ought to rest."

"Out of doors?"

"Oh, she 'll tell you all about it to-morrow," said 'Lisbeth, pursing up her mouth in the same funny way as before.

Florence was too weak to pursue the subject further, and presently was glad enough to lay her tired head upon the pillow once more.

The next morning the first object that caught her eye was a bunch of slender willow-wands, with their soft, clinging "pussies," such as she had not seen since she was a child running about under the elms in the old, quiet town by the sea. The fresh, sweet sunlight peeped through the window and rested on their gray fur, creeping down from one to another and dancing in and out in the merriest manner possible. As Florence lay there beneath the old patchwork quilt, watching this pretty play of sunshine and kittens, and listening to the soft bustle of the morning's work in the next room, a sense of great comfort and rest stole over her, and in her weakness her eyes filled with happy tears. Whatever was troublesome in the past she forgot: the future seemed as bright and yet as intangible as the sunbeams. She



only realized the watchful care and devotion that were hovering about her day and night, and, in the clear, wholesome atmosphere, her mother's religion seemed nearer to her than ever before. Her favorite verse, "Return unto thy rest, O my soul," was written in sunny characters upon the faded wall before her.

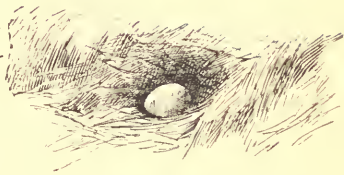


Then she began to wonder how it would seem to meet the other members of the family. The shrill voice of the old man she had often heard, but she had listened in vain for some snatch of song or girlish footfall which might belong to the gentle "Elsie" whose unseen ministrations were always attending to her comfort. As for the sturdy young fellow who had borne her so lightly through the snow, she had heard him once or twice only, speaking to 'Lisbeth in low tones, or calling cheerily somewhere outside to a passing neighbor.

"He must at least live near here," she thought, "but has probably forgotten all about me. Breakdowns are common enough in the country, and the 'women-folks' always have to be carried through the drifts."

Still, she could not help wondering a little who he was, and where he learned that slow, quiet speech. with its correctly-placed adverbs and adjectives, She at last concluded that he must be a neighbor in rather better circumstances than her hostess,—perhaps one of the proud "Hill-folks" whom Mrs. Walton was to visit. How they must have laughed over the adventure as they sat about their loaded

tables on Christmas day! Could he not have just called at the door and inquired for her during all these long weeks of suffering? Then the color came faintly to her cheeks. She was a dependant, a servant: how could she expect such attentions? The old rebellious uprising of her whole nature was beginning to assert itself once more, when 'Lisbeth's soft knock was heard at the door, and 'Lisbeth herself immediately appeared, while the sunbeams, which had somehow hidden behind a cloud just before, danced in through the window again to meet her.



"Now, dear, for breakfast. The pullets have just begun to lay, an' Elsie 's been out and found a nest in the haymow where that little Plymouth-Rock was a-cacklin' yesterday. Look!" She held up the warm, coffee-colored egg as she spoke. "How 'll you have it cooked? Boiled? Well, I 'll do it just right, and show ye how to take off the lid with a knife and eat it out of the shell. Father always has his that way."

Florence smiled in spite of herself at being treated so like a child.

"That 's right," continued Lisbeth briskly: "do n't ye go to feelin' solemn, for it 's goin' to be a grand day. And as for time to come, why, all I say is, do n't worry. You 're as welcome as the flowers of May, and I love to have ye round. You remind me of a little sister I had once, and—and—Yes, I 'm comin'!" And 'Lisbeth, guilty, for the only time in her life, of a downright deception, hurried out

of the room, pausing, however, to shut the door gently behind her.

Breakfast over, and the ceremony of enthronement in the easy chair performed, Florence, with spirits quite recovered, again recurred to Elsie. "Now, 'Lisbeth," she said gayly, "please hand me the longest pussy-willow stem for a scepter, and I will give audience to my subjects. Where is Elsie?"

III

'LISBETH stepped to the door and called through it: "Come in: she 's ready to see ye now."

Florence waited, with a bright smile dawning on her face for the kindly little spirit who handled pussy-willows and armchairs so deftly. The next minute she heard a light, firm step upon the kitchen floor. It hesitated at the door, and a gentle knock followed.



"Come right in, Elsie," cried Florence, pleased again by her delicacy. "I shall be so glad"—

She paused abruptly. The door had swung open, and there stood a tall, well-built young man, an amused twinkle in his clear gray eyes, and the corners of his mouth just failing of that demureness they aimed to achieve. Without, however, appearing to notice any element of embarrassment in the situation, he stepped forward quietly and laid in her lap a glorious bunch of roses, saying, as he did so, "I happened to be at the Corner this morning,

and was fortunate in securing the first cutting at the greenhouse. It is like the cream on Aunt 'Lisbeth's pans," he went on, evidently to give her time. "I always was troublesome just before churning days: was n't I, aunt?"

"Indeed, you were," returned 'Lisbeth, with a beaming face that flatly contradicted her words. "What with you and the two blue kittens, it 's a wonder we ever got anything but skim-milk for our butter. Them roses do look something like cream too."



By this time Florence had recovered her self-possession: "Is it possible that this is the kind fairy who has done so much for me?" She held out her hand with a frank smile as she spoke.

He stooped, not ungracefully, and took the offered hand, then laid it, almost reverently, upon the heap of roses. "Hardly a fairy," he remarked gravely; "a gnome or a goblin, perhaps. It was very pleasant service. Are you really better, Miss Amory?"

"Thank you; I feel almost too well to be treated as an invalid. Will you not be seated? And then please tell me how—how—I could have—thought"—

"Oh, I 'll tell you all about it," broke in 'Lisbeth, with a mischievous look at her tall nephew, who had obediently seated himself on one corner of the bed, that being the only unoccupied portion of the room. "You see, when Wesley"—

Florence flushed slightly; she had thought she recognized the voice, though she had heard it but

for a moment that wintry night. The name she remembered.

"—Wesley, he used to call himself 'Elsie' when he was a little trudge an' could n't speak plain. So we got into the way of callin' him that ourselves an' it 's stuck to him ever since. I 'd no notion ye did n't know who I meant, till you said 'she' yesterday. Then, thinks I, I 'll have a little surprise for her, and a good laugh won't do the child no harm, bless her!"

Harm! Why, the most cynical, crabbed, disappointed old soul in the world must have brightened up at the merry little ripple of laughter that followed. The responsibilities and struggles of the last two or three years had left their trace in the gravity of Florence's young face when in repose. It had begun to have the American tired look, and it needed excitement or a quick emotion to show to best advantage the intelligent deep-brown eyes, the wavy hair across the strong forehead, and a complexion, naturally fine and clear, rendered even more delicate by her long illness. As she looked up now, with the quick pleasure of a child, and the light of careless merriment in her eyes, her face was very sweet and winning.



Wesley was regarding her intently, his features relaxing pleasantly at her happy laugh. "No doubt you consider us all as arch-conspirators, Miss Amory," he said; "but I assure you I knew nothing of this until half an hour ago. Aunt 'Lisbeth is the Guy Fawkes."

"And I had no idea she could be so deceitful," replied Florence solemnly. "Have you any gunpowder in your apron pockets, ma'am?"

"Land sakes! no," said 'Lisbeth, with a puzzled look. "What d' you s'pose I want with powder? I guess likely Elsie 's got some up 'n his closet; though what on airth"—

Then they all laughed again: they were so simply happy that it did not take much to amuse them.

But Florence soon began to feel her strength failing in the unusual excitement, and was glad to be left alone with her patchwork quilt and her pussy-willows.

She did not see Wesley again until several days later. He was busy mending fences, 'Lisbeth said, "and in the evenin' he had to do his writin'."

Florence secretly wondered what his writing could be; but, as 'Lisbeth did not seem disposed to explain, she said nothing. She had noticed the carefulness of the sturdy young farmer's speech, the final g's on his present participles, and the even, firm pronunciation of his vowels and consonants, so different from the drawling, carelessly-clipped words of the country-people about. He must have studied hard at some village "academy," she thought.

People now began to drop in, after the neighborly St. John fashion so out of use in cities. They would settle themselves comfortably in the kitchen rocker, which was usually brought into the front room for company, and, taking a roll of knitting from bag or



apron pocket, would keep the needles flying while they talked, though but for five minutes.

Florence learned that her mother, who was herself in feeble health, had been from time to time informed of her condition, and, as the sickness had never been considered dangerous, had contented herself with writing, at first to 'Lisbeth, afterward to Florence, who was now well enough to answer. In the pure country air she gained rapidly, and before long was enabled to take her seat with the rest at table, on which occasion, be it said, her only anxiety was lest the family should go to bed supperless, with such eagerness did they devote themselves to superintending her own plate. By this time, too, she had learned to say "'Lisbeth" and "grandfather" without hesitation. As to the third member of the family, she compromised with her sense of propriety by addressing him as "Mr. Wesley." His last name she had not heard.



She was sitting by her window one bright, warm afternoon in April, watching the portly robins, now hopping about after their extraordinary food, now pausing to glance up wisely at the sky or at her window with an air half suspicious, half friendly. Their neat orange-colored waistcoats showed prettily against the fresh-tinted grass, just beginning to spring in velvety patches through the brown, unmown aftermath of the preceding fall.

On the shady side of the old stone wall that ran along the road toward the railway-station, a narrow, irregular snowbank, its surface fantastically carved

and honeycombed by the sun, still reminded her of her winter night's ride. How dreary it had all seemed! How she had dreaded even the Christmas festivities, with the inevitable being "left out,"—the awkward movements when she felt that the company about her were not quite sure whether to treat her as an equal or a servant,—worst of all, the well-meant efforts of Mrs. Walton to smooth matters over in private! Ah! how it was all changed now! She would never, never go back to her old position; indeed,—and a shadow crossed her forehead as she thought of it,—Mrs. Walton had never signified her wish to have her return. She would soon be able to help her kind friends in the housework, in sewing, and in other little ways, until she could obtain something to do for herself. She would pay them sometime. How good they had all been to her! She thought once more of that bitter, hopeless ride through the snow. How cold she had been!—her right arm benumbed with holding the robe over the children, whom, with all her troubles, she had learned to love very dearly. She recalled the sudden halt, the moaning of the wind through the trees overhead, the sifting of the sleety snow against the sides of the sleigh. Then she thought of the firm voice, assuming control so quietly, with no needless words, but, what was better, two stout arms. How they had seemed to lift her out of all her troubles, even while she was borne straight into the whirl and might of the storm! She had felt that the arms were stronger than the wind, and so had trusted them. The girl



was resting her cheek upon her hand as she lived that long night over again, and she hardly knew what a glow was in her face, or how dewy bright her eyes were, as with a start she turned to answer a knock she had learned to recognize.

Wesley looked straight into the brown eyes a moment in his grave, silent way, then reached out his hand, filled to overflowing with long trailing vines and fragrant pink-and-white blossoms.

"They told me they missed you in the woods," he said, "and begged me to carry them to you."

Florence took them in her hands and bent her face over them. She could not speak for a moment, the flowers were such a part of what she had been thinking. "I thank you," she said at length, tremulously. "They are far too beautiful to claim companionship with me. It is I who should go to them and kneel while I picked them."

"I always think of them as in 'Miles Standish':



Children lost in the woods and covered with leaves in their slumber.

It is as if they were the pure in heart, who had ascended into His holy hill."

"Where did you find them, Mr. Wesley?"

"Under the pines, by the brook. It is hardly time for them, but that is a sheltered spot, where the sun shines all day. I will take you there as soon as you can go with safety."

"Do you know," mused Florence, "it seems odd that the first English ship anchoring in Plymouth

harbor should have been called the Mayflower? Do they have these flowers in England?"

"No, Miss Amory. It would perhaps sound strange to you to hear people speak of a 'branch of mayflowers,' but by that name the English usually mean the hawthorn, which flowers in May. And it is a wonderfully beautiful sight, for England seems at that time to be fairly covered with blossoms, the hawthorns are so plentiful."



"This is 'trailing arbutus,' is it not?"

"Yes; except—pardon me—with the accent on the first syllable. But I am becoming pedantic," he added, with a smile. "Miss Amory, you once told Aunt 'Lisbeth you would like to be read to, did you not?"

Florence felt the color in her cheeks, but said simply, "Yes, I should enjoy it very much."

"Here is a bit that I came across a day or two ago." He took a printed slip from his pocket and began to read:



"Little pure-hearts, nestling shyly
On the cool, pine-shadowed slope,
Filling all the gloomy forest
With the very breath of hope,

"Whence hath come your wondrous patience,
In the dark to wait so long,—
Faith, to venture forth so bravely
At the first wee sparrow-song?

"All your alabaster boxes,
With their store of ointment sweet,
You have offered to the Master,
Humbly kneeling at his feet,



"And his gentle hands in blessing
Rest upon you day by day,
While the precious fragrance rises
Like a prayer to him alway."

Florence sat in absolute stillness while he read, just catching her breath slightly at one of the lines. She looked very much like a mayflower herself as she sat there, her hands crossed in her lap, and her face upturned to the reader. When he had finished, she was silent for a moment. Then she asked, "Who wrote that, Mr. Wesley?"

"Oh, the author's name was n't mentioned," he replied carelessly. "It was some anonymous magazine-writer who was fond of flowers and the Gospel of St. John, and chose to tell in this way what he thought about it all."

"Mr. Wesley"—

"Miss Amory?"

"Is there an institute—academy—of any sort at the Corner? I have thought of teaching, you know." Florence flushed as she spoke, and looked intently out of the window.

"There is something of that sort there now, I believe. It was started only a year or two ago."

"Why, then you"—The words came before she could check them.

"No," he answered, smiling, "I was only able to attend the district school that you passed between here and Haybrook Station."

"But—you have learned somewhere?"

She was in for it now, though her face burned as she asked the question.



"I studied at home," he replied quietly. "Then I worked for a man at Haybrook Center, and he helped me with my Greek and Latin until I was able to enter Bowdoin. I graduated five years ago."

"Thank you," she said heartily. "I 'm afraid I have been unpardonably inquisitive ; but you must accord a certain indulgence to invalids, which, I believe, they are usually not slow to claim. If you had not criticised my pronunciation of this little flower's name, I should not have taken such a liberty. Am I forgiven?" she concluded, looking up brightly into his face again.

"I have passed harder examinations in history," he said good-humoredly; "and some day I may retaliate by examining you to even better purpose. Will you answer all my questions then?"

Florence laughed outright: "How solemnly you speak! To be sure I will. My story will be even shorter than yours. I think one answer will be enough for the whole."

"Yes, I think it will," he said slowly, then checked himself, and, remarking soberly that "her little forest children would be none the worse for wetting their feet," turned, without further words, and left the room.

IV



A FEW days after this conversation, 'Lisbeth entered the kitchen waving an envelope over her head. "It 's accepted," she cried; "I know by the feel of it! It 's a money-order or a check,—it do n't make no difference which. Abner Slack was just comin' back from the Corner, so he called in t' the post-office an' brought it along."

"I 'm afraid I do n't understand," said Florence, who was the only other person in the room. "Whom is it from, and to whom is it addressed, please?"

"Why, to Elsie, of course. Look there!"

She pointed to the name of a well-known periodical, printed in an upper corner of the envelope.

"He 's been trying to get something into that for these six months past, and nothin 's ever come back but those old circulars, telling how the editor 's feelin' *so* bad, because the piece is a leetle bit too long, or not quite suited, or better for some other magazine! Poor boy, he 'd got so discouraged and put down 'bout it that I did n't know but he 'd give up for good."

"Then that 's why he writes so much. Oh, but are you sure he would n't mind your telling me?"

"Bless you, no; he do n't make no secret of it. He got into the way of writin' for the papers while he was schoolin' at Bowdoin, and when he came

home he just made up his mind that that was his callin', and that he would stick to farmin' for a while until he got money enough to move to the city, where he could get at more books. About six weeks ago he sent a great thick bunch o' paper—I 'm sure I do n't know what 't was all about—to the magazine, and, as I told ye, they 've sent back this envelope instead of the bunch. So I know it 's taken."



'Lisbeth's kind face fairly beamed as she spoke, and her eyes were moist. "If you 'd known," she went on, wiping them with the corner of her apron, "the setbacks that boy 's had, and the big pack of them old printed things he 's got saved up—he 's the most perseverin' critter—There! here 'm I standin' talkin', instead of givin' the letter to him this minute!" She ran up-stairs in her quick, nervous way, and, as they all sat round the uneven table that night, the light in the young man's eyes showed that 'Lisbeth had not mistaken the contents of the mail.

"I 'm trying to do my duty on the farm," he told Florence afterward, "and at the same time to find whether I really have a message to the world, or a part of it, however small. I always have to remember the reply of the old Scotch minister who was asked by an anxious young pulpit aspirant whether he thought he had a call to preach. 'Try it, mon,' he said; 'try it, an' dootless ye 'll succeed, gin ye find oot 'at onybody has a ca' to hear ye.' I should n't want to be 'stickit,'" he added, smiling.

"But—pardon me, Mr. Wesley—what kind of writing do you mean to do? There are so many

branches, you know: poetry, fiction, history, essays"—

"That is just what I must discover. The main thing is not the form, but the substance. I want to write that which shall comfort and strengthen people, help them when they are in trouble, give them rest when they are tired, make life bright and cheery for them when the world seems gray." He spoke with kindling eyes. "If I have ever written—if I shall ever write—a line that does not, in some poor way, however feeble, tend to this result, I pray that it may be blotted out, destroyed with the paper on which it is printed!"

This talk was followed by others of like nature. By degrees Wesley, finding a sympathetic listener always ready, and a kind but firm critic as well, fell insensibly into the habit of reading, at first passages here and there, afterward whole articles, to the gentle, dark-haired girl who was so quick to catch the deeper significance he had intended in this or that turn of thought and reflect it in her intent brown eyes.



So the spring wore on, and then came summer, with its long, fair days, its fragrant hay-fields, its never-ceasing chirp and whir of insect life. Month after month passed, and still Florence lingered with her kind friends. With the oppressive heats of August the old man had felt his strength fail rapidly, and spent much of his time within-doors, lying upon the lounge or in the stuffed rocking-chair, and needing many little offices from those around. This

special duty Florence from the first assumed, and more loving care or regard to his slightest want he could not have received from a granddaughter. She would read or talk softly to him by the hour, would listen patiently to his childish, halting speech, and move lightly to and fro in his service, until he would have no one else about him, lying perfectly still, with half-closed eyes, when she was out of the house, until the familiar footfall or the pleasant voice told of her return.

As the flowers in the little garden fell before the early frosts and the maple boughs began to kindle through the mellow autumn haze, the life of the old man, weary with its long stay upon earth, was plainly preparing to lay aside its worn-out garments; and one bright September morning when the first rays of the sun found their way through the little window-panes of the low-browed east chamber, Florence knew that the moment had come.

She had been sitting up all night, and now stepped quickly across the kitchen to call the other members of the household. They came, and the final long, tired breath was drawn at last. They waited, but no more came. Wesley turned to Florence, took her hand and held it silently for a moment, and then, in the quiet country way, went out to give notice of the death, have the bell tolled, and arrange for the funeral.



In the loneliness that fell upon the old house during the next few weeks, Florence made no effort to go. It was plain that she was needed, for death, no



matter how long or fully expected, is an awful visitor at the last, and leaves behind him an oppression which cannot be soon thrown off. So it was Florence who quietly carried away the funeral flowers after the family had returned from the little churchyard, it was she who threw open the blinds of grandfather's room and let in the sweet, fresh sunshine, and it was she who, without forcing an unwelcome cheerfulness upon the rest, was nevertheless the light of the house from the time when her bright face, full of sympathy, greeted 'Lisbeth in the gray November mornings until the three gathered about the cosy tea-table by the flickering light of the fire.

Once her mother came down for a visit of a day or two, which lengthened into a fortnight. She had offered to pay for her daughter's accommodations, to the intense astonishment and displeasure of 'Lisbeth.

"She earns her board, every bit of it," said that lady with energy. "I do n't know what I should do without her workin' and singin' round the house. You jest let her stay till she wants to go,—that is, ma'am, if you can spare her yourself. She 's gainin' in health every day of her life, and when she 's ready she 'll take hold as she never did before, I can tell you."

So matters were left as they were, until, with a start, Florence remembered, one bright, cold afternoon, that it was just a year since she had been carried in through the front door that bitter night.

Wesley had come in from his work a few moments



before, glowing with the exercise and the keen air, to ask her to take a sleigh-ride with him that evening. The roads were fine, he said, and the colt, not having been out for a week, was in the best of spirits. There was a full moon, too, and they would celebrate Christmas Eve by this drive, just by way of contrast with that of a year ago.

In gayest mood, therefore, Florence stood upon the broad door-stone in front of the house when, a few hours later, the colt came jingling up from the barn with a light step, plainly considering the sleigh and its load the most stupendous joke conceivable, really nothing at all for a strong young fellow like him ; it was difficult for him, on the whole, to realize that he was in harness at all. That his driver, however, was hardly inclined to allow him to forget that fact was evident from the even, steady rein and the firm voice behind it.

For a few moments, as Florence took her place beside Wesley, she felt unaccountably shy ; this soon wore off in the rush of sweet, cool air past their cheeks and the wonderful beauty of the night. How the starlight twinkled and danced from each little bright point above the white, silent world, waiting for the far-off chords of angel music ! Christmas Eve. No sound in the air but the silvery voice of the bells and the murmur of the pines, " Peace, peace on earth."

Wesley stooped to arrange the heavy fur robe more warmly about his companion. Then he turned and looked into her earnest, upturned face. " Do

you know," he said, quietly, "what I should label my picture if I were to paint your portrait? 'A Brown Study.'"

Florence laughed a little: "I was only thinking how very contented I was, and how much more happiness this Christmas looks back upon than the last."

"Miss Amory, are you in a mood for answering questions to-night?" He felt her start slightly under the robe. "Because, you know, you have never passed that examination."

There was something in his voice, an earnestness underlying his light words, that made her turn her head quickly to meet his glance.

At that moment they were passing through a belt of woods where the brightness of the sky and the faint light of the rising moon made the shadows cower thick and black beside every log and snowy mound.

Whether the young horse had spied one of these stretching into the road, or she had jarred the reins by her involuntary movement, Florence never knew. It happened like a lightning-stroke,—the sudden quiver of the colt from head to foot, and at the same instant the sharp word of command from Wesley, then the plunge ahead. In one terrified glance at the half-maddened animal she saw a fragment of leather hanging from the foam-covered bit. The rein had parted under the strain, and the remnant lay loose and worse than useless in the driver's hand.



The horse was bounding wildly along the icy road, with the light sleigh swaying from side to side, half the time upon one runner, threatening every moment to overturn.

"Florence, will you do what I say?"

"Yes."

She did not mind the name. Were they not together in the shadow of death? Oh, that awful whirl of hoof-beats! the utter helplessness of it all; the mockery of the cushioned seats and warm wraps!

But there was no time for thought. Wesley was taking the heavy buffalo-robe and turning it with quick, skillful hands, as she had seen him turn a paper at home when he was reading aloud to them all in the quiet evenings around the old brick fireplace. His calmness gave her strength.

"Take this corner," he said. "Hold it with the fur up. Now let the rest of the robe fall slowly over the dasher in front of the whiffletree. When I give the word, lower the whole instantly, as I do, keeping your hold of the upper corner, so that the lower part will clog the runners. Do you understand?"

She nodded. There was little time now to spare. They knew the road well enough to remember the clump of oaks just ahead of them. There was a sudden turn there, to avoid a ledge where the workmen had blasted for the bridge last summer.

Florence crouched in the bottom of the sleigh,



set her teeth hard, and, with both hands buried in the long fur, waited.

The ledge came in sight, ugly and black.

"Now!"



For an instant it seemed as if the slender wrists would break, or that she must be drawn over the dasher and thrown under the horse's hoofs. She never thought of letting go her hold. All her New England heroism came to her aid, and the robe did not gain an inch.

Gradually the tired horse felt the heavy drag, aided by a slight ascent in the road. His speed slackened; the wild run became a clumsy gallop,—slower,—slower. Then came the soothing tones of his driver, and he turned his ears back to listen. In another moment Wesley was out of the sleigh and at his head. The danger was over.

The full moon was now looking down from the eastern sky, and pouring its flood of dreamy light over the cruel ledges.

Wesley led the trembling horse, now wholly subdued, to an oak beside the road, and fastened him securely enough this time. Then he went back to the sleigh. He had not spoken before.

She was still crouching in front of the seat, with her pale face resting against the cushions. It was a very white little hand that was held out in the moonlight to meet his. He took it, and did not let it go. "Florence!" He felt the little hand flutter in his own, but still he did not let it go. Half turning, he drew the torn robe about her, his hand

lingering on every fold. "Florence, may I try to keep you from cold and darkness and death so long as I live?" Ah, how quick his ears were to catch that wee shadow of a whisper! No one else could have heard it. As he gathered her white face, brown hair, little hand, fur robe, and all in his own strong arms for a moment, "That one word is my Christmas song," he said softly. "Little princess, shall we go?" And he took his post at the horse's head.

It was a wonderful ride back, over the gleaming road, with that tall, silent figure walking before. As they turned aside into the little open space in front of the gray old house, and halted once more by the door-stone, he came quickly to her side and held out his arms as he had a year ago. Only this time he said simply, with a great gladness in his voice, "Come, Florence; we have reached home!"



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